

PLUCK AND LUCK

STORIES OF ADVENTURE.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second-Class Matter at the New York Post Office, November 7, 1898, by Frank Tousey.

No. 508.

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 26, 1908.

Price 5 Cents.

THE PRIDE OF THE VOLUNTEERS; OR, BURKE HALLIDAY, THE BOY FIREMAN.

By Ex FIRE-CHIEF MARSH.



Then he heard a great shout from below as the people caught a glimpse of him. He remembered that, and then as the merciless flames touched him behind, he gathered the young girl tightly to his breast, and leaped from the window.

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THE PRIDE OF THE VOLUNTEERS

OR,

BURKE HALLIDAY, THE BOY FIREMAN

By EX-FIRE-CHIEF WARDEN.

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRE COMPANIES OF REDBORO'.

The quiet little village of Redboro', way back in the mountains, some four hours' ride by rail from New York, was startled one day by the shrill whistle of a locomotive engine. For years and years the village had nestled down between the mountains, in a beautiful little valley, through which flowed one of the tributary streams of the Susquehanna, with nothing to disturb its Rip Van Winkle slumbers. It had moved along in the even tenor of its way, with one or two small factories utilizing the fine water power the little river afforded. The young men and maidens had grown up together there, and married and settled down to live as their parents had done before them.

But now all that had changed.

The progress of the age demanded that railroads should tap the country in every direction, and bring the treasures of the country to the great markets of the nation.

The railroad running westward from the great cities of the East passed through Redboro', and in a little while the place began to fill up. Capitalists came and saw the immense water power in the little valley and quickly bought up land and houses.

The little village began to put on city airs. Great factories went up all along the water course, and tenement houses for the use of the operatives went up with them.

With the population thus increased, new fields of enterprise opened to men of every calling.

Merchants, mechanics, lawyers and doctors came in, all eager to grow up with the country.

No wonder that old settlers at sleepy, little Redboro' opened their eyes in astonishment. They thought the good, old days had gone forever, and that the world was slipping away from them. They would look around in a dazed sort of way at the tenement houses reaching up to five and six stories in height, standing on ground where they had played when barefooted urchins.

Redboro' was no longer a "Sleepy Hollow" settlement, but a thriving young city, with a rushing, pushing, busy population with whom competition was the life of trade.

One night a fire broke out in one of the tenement houses.

Built of wood, it burned up like tinder, and several lives were lost.

That was a terrible experience for Redboro'.

Such a thing had never happened there before in the memory of the oldest inhabitant, and it was the talk of the town for days and weeks thereafter.

The property owners became alarmed.

They realized that the whole town could be swept away in a few hours, and not a fire engine in the place.

A meeting of citizens was called, at which the situation was discussed. It was resolved to organize a fire company at once, and volunteer members were called for.

The young men, and a good many who were not so very young, volunteered with great enthusiasm. So many desired to join that a second company was organized.

Then a hook and ladder company was called for and the roll promptly filled up. The whole town was full of the subject.

In organizing the second company a youth not more than seventeen years old desired to join. He was a sturdy, young fellow, with laughing, blue eyes and pleasant, open countenance, and had the reputation of being the fastest runner, best leaper and most expert boxer in Redboro'. Everybody liked Burke Halliday for his many good qualities of head and heart.

One young man objected to him on the ground that he was a "boy."

"When did you cease to be one yourself," Burke indignantly asked the dudish objector, which brought down the house and made the dude as mad as a hornet.

"We don't want any boys," said the fellow. "They will be in our way at a fire."

"So they will," retorted Burke; "so you had better keep away now. I am a boy. I expect to be one as long as I live, and when my head is gray I'll be one of the old boys still."

"By jingo!" exclaimed one of the others, "I like that kind of talk. He's got the stuff in him. I move that we tack two years more onto him and take him in."

It was carried with a hurrah, and Joe Pendergast, the young man who objected, was as mad as a hornet. He was laughed at by the others, and Burke forthwith became the pet of the company.

"What shall we call the company?" Jack Alton, who had been elected foreman, asked.

"Call it 'The Boys' Company,'" suggested Joe, with a sneer.

"Call it the 'Dude Fireman's Company,'" suggested another, "in honor of Joe Pendergast."

Joe was mad.

He sprang to his feet and shook his fist at the speaker, saying:

"I can wallop the 'dude' out of you in two minutes, Bill Hawkins!"

"But I'm not a 'dude,'" said Bill, laughing good naturedly. "I'm a fireman. What are you?"

"I'm a man!" he replied, drawing himself up with great dignity.

Hawkins gave a prolonged whistle, at which there was a roar of laughter.

"I move we call it 'The Wide Awake,'" suggested Burke Halliday, the youngest member of the company.

"That's a good name," said Alton. "I like it very much."

Jack was an old New York fireman, who had seen much service in the city.

The name was adopted—as were the old, red shirt and fireman's hat.

Jack called them together every night to give them points. They met in a vacant building, the use of which had been tendered them.

At last the engines and the hook-and-ladder truck, hose-carriages and hose came, and a grand parade in uniform followed the day after their arrival.

Such an excitement had never been seen in Redboro' before, and everybody turned out to make a gala day of it. The old settlers looked on in wondering amazement at the progress of Young America.

One evening Burke heard the foreman telling about a negro who belonged to the engine he was attached to in New York. He was interested.

"By George!" he exclaimed, "that's just the racket! We must have a 'coon,' too, to bring us water at a hot fire."

The others laughed.

"Oh, you may laugh, but we're going to have the 'coon'! I know the one we want."

Jack smiled, and remarked:

"I guess Joe would draw the line at coons."

"Of course he will; but what do we care for that? Joe isn't much of a fireman, anyway."

"What's your coon's name?"

"Pete Echols, but he is known only as Pete."

"What's he good for?"

"Good for anything—fight, fun, fire and work."

"That's rather a remarkable combination of good qualities for one coon to possess. Bring him around and let us see him. We have got to have a handy man around to look after things, and if we can pick up a good coon, so much the better."

That evening Burke brought Pete to the headquarters of the Wide Awake fire company.

He was as black as tar, about twenty years of age, strong as a mule, and as good-natured as a sunbeam.

"Here's your curly head," said Burke, introducing Pete to the foreman.

Jack looked at Pete from head to foot, and then asked Burke:

"Do you know him?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Five or six years."

"Is he honest?"

"Yes—you can trust him with anything except a chicken."

He draws the line at chickens—a fishing line with a grain of corn on the end of it."

"Hbl' on dar, Burke," said Pete, "I doan' want none ob dat. Dis heah am bizness."

"Of course it is. That's what you say to the chickens," returned Burke. "But we'll drop that, as we have nothing to do with chickens. He's just the coon we want, Jack."

Jack thought so, too, and Jack had the say about it. Pete became a member of the company in a way.

When the new engine house was finished the beautiful engine was placed in it, and the hall upstairs became a sort of clubroom for the use of the members of the company.

The other company adopted the name of The Redboro' Fire Company, and elected an old ex-fireman foreman. His name was Kaufman. He was a German who had been in this country many years.

Kaufman made the mistake of referring to the Wide Awakes as "de poys' gompany," and it soon reached their ears.

That at once excited a rivalry between the two companies, which did more than anything else to urge the Wide Awakes to an incessant drill in the use of their engine.

Jack Alton was a thorough-going fireman, and had resolved to bring the young company behind him to the front as the superior of the other.

The boys really longed for a fire in order that they might be able to try their hand at it and show the town what they could do.

At last the alarm came.

The firebell located the fire, and in a moment every member of the two companies sprang from the work he was doing and made for their headquarters at full speed.

At the first tap of the bell Pete threw open the door of the engine-house and laid out the rope by which the boys were to pull it. They laid hold and dashed away at full speed, and reached the fire about two minutes ahead of the Redboro's."

The fire was an old frame building which burned like shavings. Nothing could save it, and so Jack turned the hose on the other houses to save them.

In the adjoining house lived a well-to-do family named Houghton.

The family remained in the building until the great heat from the flames set it on fire.

Then the whole side seemed to blaze up all at once, as if it had been saturated with oil.

Of course the family were panic-stricken, and made frantic efforts to save themselves. The house was filled with flame and smoke so quickly that scarcely half of them succeeded in getting out of the different rooms in time to find their way down the stairs.

Bessie Houghton, the young seventeen-year-old daughter of the family, succeeded in getting out. Then she looked wildly around for her mother.

"Oh, my mother—my poor mother!" she screamed.

Instantly Jack Alton sprang through the tongue of flame that shot out of the door, and disappeared from sight.

A cry of horror went up from the crowd.

They had never seen anything like that in Redboro' before, and now they expected to see his charred bones in the ashes the next day.

But they were doomed to be surprised that day in more ways than one.

A couple of minutes later he reappeared—rolled out on the ground with Bessie's mother in his arms. Both were nearly suffocated.

Bessie was frantic, calling upon everybody to save her mother and her aunt.

"Is there another in there?" one of the firemen asked.

"Yes—my aunt—my Aunt Peggy is in there!"

Four men made unsuccessful efforts to get into the house; but the flames fairly boiled out of the door and drove them back.

Bessie's mother now joined her cries to those of her daughter, and from the two it was learned that the aunt lived in the room up one flight—at the head of the stairs.

"Too late! Too late!" cried several firemen, as the last one was driven back by the flames.

Bessie looked around with a despairing look in her face, as if in search of someone.

Burke Halliday was the one nearest to her in his red shirt and helmet.

She sprang to his side, caught him with both hands and cried:

"Won't you save my poor aunt?"

"I'll try," replied Burke, and pulling the helmet well down over his eyes, he made a run and leaped through the open door right in the face of a seething blast of red flame.

"Hol' on dar! Hol' on dar, I tole yer!" screamed black Pete, almost beside himself when he saw Burke make the run. But before the last word fell from his lips the young fireman had disappeared from sight. A cry of shuddering amazement went up from firemen and spectators alike.

"The boy is lost!" groaned Jack Alton.

"My God!" gasped Joe Pendergast. "What does the young fool mean?"

Bessie Houghton was dumfounded at the terrible doom to which she believed the youth had rushed at her solicitation, and instantly ceased her cries. She held her breath as she fastened her eyes on the spot where she had last seen the young fireman.

A cry—a single cry from the crowd caused everyone to look up at the window of the aunt's room. There stood the youth with the form of a little old woman in his arms.

Her clothing was on fire, and she appeared to be unconscious.

"The ladder! The ladder!" cried Alton, with a frantic energy that startled everyone.

But Burke could not wait for the ladder.

He made a motion to throw his burden out of the window and Jack rushed forward, crying out:

"Let her drop!"

He did let her drop, and Jack caught her.

The next moment Burke sprang out, and landing on his feet, rolled over on the ground gasping like one in the last stage of suffocation.

CHAPTER II.

BURKE, THE YOUNG HERO.

When Burke struck the ground a wild shout went up from the thousands of spectators who witnessed his daring act. They made a rush to get him, but the firemen and the few policemen managed to drive them back.

Jack turned the little old woman over to some friends of the family, and hastened to look after Burke.

The young fireman was as limp as a rag, and utterly oblivious to what was going on about him.

"Burke, my boy!" he called, shaking him roughly, "are you hurt? Speak, Burke, old fellow! My God, I fear he is killed!"

At that moment the greatest excitement ever known in Redboro' was in full sway. The people, carried away by the intrepid daring of the youth, rushed forward to aid him, pushing the firemen themselves almost into the flames.

But the police at last managed to get possession of him, and

had him carried into the nearest drug store, where a physician took him in charge.

The two buildings were destroyed, but the almost super-human efforts of the firemen saved the others nearby. The faithful fellows remained to keep up a steady stream of water playing on the embers as long as any possible danger threatened.

At the drug store it was found that Burke was quite seriously burned about his face and hands, and that he had inhaled so much hot smoke that it made him very ill. His clothes were so badly scorched that they came off partly in handling him.

Such is the great admiration which the average man or woman has for heroism of any kind, that no demonstration of that quality ever fails to meet its just reward in the way of applause. Everybody in Redboro' knew rollicking Burke Halliday as a daring, saucy youth, with many good traits of head and heart. But that he had the stuff in him that real heroes are made of was a revelation to them.

They had seen him do what stern, strong men shrank from doing, and had saved the life of an old woman almost at the expense of his own.

"Brave boy!" they cried.

"He's a hero!" chorused hundreds.

Then they left the burning building to crowd around the little drug store where he had been carried, to hear the extent of his injuries and sympathize with him.

"How is he, doctor?" some man in the crowd asked, as the doctor came out of the drug store.

"He is pretty badly roasted," was the reply, "but he'll be all right in a week or two."

He was laid on a stretcher and carried home—the crowd making a passage for him as the bearers bore him along.

They followed him to his humble home. His widowed mother was frantic with grief, but grew calmer when the doctor assured her that he was in no danger whatever.

When the Wide Awakes returned to their headquarters they appointed a committee to visit the humble home of Burke Halliday and express to him and his mother their sense of his heroic conduct.

"The boy has proved himself the man of the company," said Jack Alton, the foreman.

The next day pretty Bessie Houghton, accompanied by her father, called at the cottage and asked to see Burke. She was shown into the room where he lay on his back on his bed.

"Oh, Mr. Halliday!" she cried, "I hope you are not much hurt."

"Well, I hope so, too," he said, "but I am in very great pain. Burns are not pleasant things to have, you know. How is your aunt?"

"She is burned in a few spots, but feels so thankful over her escape alive that she says she don't mind the pain. See here. She sent me here to give you these as a token of her gratitude for your heroic conduct," and she displayed a handsome gold watch and a well-filled silk purse, both of which she laid on the table beside him.

Burke looked at them in silence for a minute or two, and then said:

"I am much obliged to you, Miss Bessie, but I—I can't accept anything for doing what I did. I am a fireman, you know, and it was my duty to save anyone in peril from fire."

"But you must take them for her sake," said Bessie. "If you do not it will break her heart, and she is such a dear, good old soul. She says she would have been roasted to death but for you. She doesn't talk of anything else, and she is coming to see you just as soon as she can get out. Say you will accept them, now."

Burke still hesitated. He knew not how much money was

in the purse. They were poor—very poor—having nothing but his small wages which he earned in one of the mills, and what his mother and young sister earned with their needles.

Bessie's eyes filled with tears.

"Burke Halliday," she said, "when my last hope was gone yesterday I turned to you and begged you to save my poor aunt. You quickly sprang forward and saved her at the risk of your own life. I now ask you again to accept these for my sake. I have set my heart on it. You cannot refuse me the pleasure, I know."

How could he? Bessie was about his own age, and very pretty. He had known her all his life, and always admired her.

"Yes, I'll do it!" he said, after a pause of several moments.

"Oh, thank you ever so much!" she said. "You don't know how glad you make me! You have made me your friend for life!"

"Burke, my boy," said Bessie's father, taking his hand, "you ave made every man in Redboro' your fast friend. The hole town is talking about you, and we owe you a debt of ratitude we don't know how we can repay. When you get ter this come to my store, and I'll give you a place there 'ere you can earn better pay than at the mill."

I am much obliged to you, sir," said Burke, his eyes filling with tears. "I'll accept your offer for mother's sake."

"He loves his mother," said Mrs. Halliday. "He has been a good boy," and the proud look in her eyes told that the tribute came from her heart.

"I know he is," said Mr. Houghton. "We all know Burke. Don't forget to call on me, my boy," and Mr. Houghton shook hands with him and went away, leaving Bessie to return home at her leisure.

Bessie remained to talk with the widow and Mamie Halliday. The sister was two years younger than her brother, very pretty and industrious. There had never been anything more than a speaking acquaintance between the two girls heretofore, but now they talked like old friends.

Old Peggy Bethune was the maiden aunt of Bessie Houghton's mother. She was rich and eccentric, but generous and kind in all things. She had been living for years with her niece, who loved her dearly for her good qualities. Such was the person whom Burke had snatched from the jaws of death. Bessie and Mamie talked about many things that interested them, but during the conversation Bessie spoke of Burke as a real hero, which greatly pleased Mamie.

"Brother never was afraid of anything," said his sister, proudly, "and he is as good as he is brave."

"All brave men are good-hearted," remarked Bessie; "at least I've always heard they were."

"I guess it's true," Mamie said.

Bessie finally took her leave, saying she would come again as soon as her aunt was able to get out and come with her.

"Mother," said Burke, as soon as she was gone, "you take the purse and sis the watch."

"Why, brother!" exclaimed Mamie, in astonishment, "you must keep the watch yourself."

"My sweet sis hasn't got any watch," said Burke, laughing, "and I don't need any. I'd soon break it. Besides, I can always tell when it's dinner time by my stomach."

The mother and daughter laughed and took up the presents to look at them.

The purse contained one hundred dollars in bills. They had never had so much money before at any one time, and it made them feel rich for the time being.

"You shall have another suit in the place of the one that was so badly injured by the fire," said his mother.

"That's all right, mother," he replied, "and don't forget to buy a silk gown for yourself."

"Oh, that wouldn't do," remarked his mother, "for people would say I had bought it with this money."

"Well, then, just wait till I get out again, and I'll see about it myself."

In another week he was out, and had been on the street. The Wide Awakes gave him a reception at the engine-house that was attended by quite a number of ladies, among them Bessie Houghton.

She was the prettiest girl in the room, and was sought after by more than any other. Joe Pendergast had been paying her some attention for months, and she was somewhat partial to him. But on this evening she seemed disposed to give all her smiles to the hero of the hour.

"Burke is the hero of all our firemen," she said to Joe, "and your company ought to be proud of him."

That was a bitter dose for Joe, hating Burke as he did.

"He is a brave fellow," he remarked, "but you ladies will ruin him as sure as fate. No boy—and he is nothing else—can long stand such flattery without becoming vain and conceited."

"I hope for better things for Burke," she replied, "though I know a good many men become very conceited without any flattery at all. Burke seems to have a great deal of hard sense, though, and it may not hurt him."

Another week passed, and old Peggy Bethune, accompanied by Bessie Houghton, paid a visit to the Halliday cottage. Burke was not at home, and Mamie went in quest of him. She found him down at the engine-house, and carried him back home with her.

The old lady took both his hands in hers, and said:

"I have come to thank you for saving my life, Burke Halliday, and—"

"Oh, that's all right, Miss Bethune," he said, interrupting her good-naturedly. "Thank Bessie—she put me up to it. You know a fellow can't get away from her when she gets after him."

Bessie laughed and blushed when she heard him say that, and was about to speak, when old Aunt Peggy said:

"Yes, I know all that, Burke. Several other men tried to do what you did and failed. I am sorry you were hurt, but I'll burn you worse than that if you ever call me Miss Bethune again. I am Aunt Peggy to you and your mother and sister. Do you hear that?"

"Yes, Aunt Peggy."

"There! That's a good boy. If I were fifty years younger than I am I'd set my cap for you."

"Why, Aunt Peggy, you are not fifty years old yet?" exclaimed Burke.

"You young rascal! Don't you try to blarney me! You can't do it," and they all joined in a hearty laugh together.

After further conversation Bessie said:

"Father told me to tell you that he was in need of another clerk in the store, and that you could have the position if you wanted it."

"I do want it," he replied, very frankly.

"Then go down there and take it," said Aunt Peggy.

"I will go after dinner."

"Oh, I am so glad!" said Mamie, passing her arm around Bessie's waist.

"So am I," returned Bessie, "for he'll be a great help to father."

In the afternoon Burke went down to the store and was given a situation where he could earn decent pay, and a clerk was instructed to initiate him into the mysteries of dry goods and groceries.

The very next day after he was installed behind the counter Burke saw black Pete enter the store and look around as if in search of someone.

"What is it, Pete?" he asked.

"Dar you is, Burke," replied Pete. "I declar' ter gracious I'se glad ter see yer. Don't yer go fo' ter go back on yer nigger fren', Burke."

"Don't lose your nut, Pete. I'm Burke Halliday all the time," extending his hand.

"I tol' 'em dat," said Pete, grasping his hand and shaking it warmly, and then he turned away and left the store.

CHAPTER III.

THE BATTLE OF THE FIREMEN.

"What did he want?" Mr. Houghton asked of Burke, having seen the meeting without having been able to hear what was said.

"Nothing," replied Burke. "He belongs down at the Wide Awake engine-house, where some of the boys had been telling him that I wouldn't shake hands with him since I have left the mill and became a clerk."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him I was the same old Burke Halliday, and shook hands with him. Pete is a jolly good nigger, sir, and a great friend of mine, and I never go back on a friend."

The merchant looked at him in silence for a minute or two, and said:

"You did right, Burke. Never get too proud to recognize a friend, no matter how humble he may be," and he grasped his hand in token of his approbation of his course.

A few moments later a half dozen young girls came in, and all seemed to want the young fireman to wait on them. Burke was active and obliging, with a good word and a smile for each!

Bessie, the merchant's daughter, came in every day, and never left without having a few words with him; and sometimes Aunt Peggy came with her. The little old lady called him her "boy," and would insist on his coming up to the house of evenings to see her.

But it was at the engine-house of evenings where Burke felt most at home. Jack and Hal Halsey had taken up a collection in the company, and had a silver badge of honor made, which they presented Burke in the name of the company.

Burke was thunderstruck. He hadn't dreamed of anything of the kind, and said, with tears in his eyes:

"I am very much obliged to you fellows. I am only a boy yet, but I'll be a man after awhile."

"You're a man now," replied Jack, "and the best in the company, so let up on that."

"That'll do for you, Jack," said Burke. "My mother will be proud of this," and he seemed to appreciate it more in that light than as a memento of his own daring deed.

"I'm getting awful sick of all this gush over that boy," remarked Joe Pendergast to one of the firemen at his side, "and think it is about time we were letting up on him. Enough is enough of anything."

"Just what I think, too," said the other. "Burke did a big thing at the fire, but we ought to let up on it. Ah! There's the bell!"

The fire-bell struck, and in an instant the firemen were donning red shirts and helmets, and rushing downstairs to the engine-room, where black Pete had everything in readiness for them.

Out of the engine-house they dashed, and with a yell set off in the direction of the fire.

It was at least a half mile down the main street, and they had a fair field for a swift run.

But they had not gone but two blocks when the Redboro's came into the street right alongside of them.

That made a race for the fire a natural result, and it began.

Jack Alton was game. He placed his trumpet to his lips and called out:

"First at the fire, boys!"

"Wide Awake!" yelled Burke, and the young firemen sprang forward at the top of their speed.

The young men were better runners than the older ones, and gradually shoved ahead of them in the race.

A wild hurrah burst from them when they saw they were beating the other company, and the rush and roar of the two engines as they sped down Main street called everybody to the front doors and windows.

The fire was in a vacant building, and as the Wide Awakes threw the first stream of water on it a cheer went up from the spectators.

The fire was soon under control after both engines began to play on it, and in an hour's time it was quenched entirely.

But as the engines were about to leave to return to their respective quarters, someone of the Wide Awakes called out to the Redboro's:

"Why don't you fellers get up and hustle yourselves when you start for a fire?"

The Redboro' crowd was mad at again being second in reaching a fire, and did not care to be guyed by anybody.

"We don't want any lip from you fellows," replied one of their number.

"You want more leg and less lip," said Burke, at which there was a roar of laughter at the expense of the Redboro's.

"Py shiminy!" exclaimed Kaufman, the big Dutch foreman of the Redboro's, shaking his trumpet at Burke. "Auf you say dot so much I preak you lip mit dat horn."

Burke laughed and cried out:

"Sauerkraut!"

Another roar, and the exasperated German ran up and struck him with his trumpet.

That was enough.

A general free fight instantly followed, and nearly two score of men began pummeling each other with might and main.

Jack Alton saw Kaufman strike Burke, and the next moment he was wiping up the ground with him.

The police tried in vain to separate them. The moment one couple were parted another clenched, and so the fight went on.

It lasted nearly half an hour without either company getting the advantage. By that time the mayor came up and began calling on them to desist.

By degrees peace was restored, but nearly one-half the combatants had black eyes and bruised faces. A few noses were out of joint.

Both companies returned to their quarters, vowing vengeance against each other at some future time.

Two days later another alarm sounded.

It was a sudden, sharp call, and every fireman sprang to his feet to hasten to his post.

The fire was in a tall tenement house only two blocks away from Houghton's store. Burke saw the smoke and heard the screams of the women as soon as he left the store.

The thought that he might be able to save life if he hastened to the fire at once, instead of going to the engine-house, sent him there a full speed.

He saw the smoke issuing out of several windows, and heard women and children screaming frantically for help.

Dashing up four flights of stairs, he found a lot of women and children so panic-stricken that they did not know what to do or which way to run.

"Keep quiet!" he yelled, "or you'll all roast to death!" So clear and fearless were his tones that they instantly obeyed him.

Just then his feet struck a pile of clothes lines.

Taking it up, he called out to the women:

"Take hold of the rope, all of you, and run downstairs with it. I'll hold to this end."

They instantly obeyed him, and the next moment all the women and children seized the rope and started down the stairs.

He pulled steadily to prevent them from falling on the stairs, till they all reached the sidewalk.

Then he drew up the rope, ran to the front window just as the Wide Awakes dashed up, threw one end out, crying to those below:

"Tie the hose pipe and send it up!"

They tied it, and the next instant Burke began to haul it up, hand over hand, while huge black volumes boiled out the window all round him.

CHAPTER IV.

THE JEALOUS CLERK AND THE YOUNG FIREMAN'S DISCHARGE.

Whenever a great peril threatens an individual an all-absorbing interest at once centers in that person. Everybody who becomes aware of the danger that menaces the individual instantly becomes a mental speculator on the imperiled one's chances of escape, though a tremendous excitement may be raging at the moment.

So it was in the case of Burke Halliday when he began drawing the hose up to the fourth story window of the burning tenement house.

When they saw the dense volume of black smoke boiling out of the window all around him they at once began to reckon up the actual chances of his escape from a horrible death by fire.

Hundreds held their breath in momentary expectation of seeing him tumble out of the window, half-suffocated by the smoke.

Jack Alton very soon regretted that he had allowed him to draw up the hose instead of ordering him to come down at once. But it was too late to attempt to pull it away from him, and so he watched him with breathless interest.

The higher the hose was drawn the heavier it became, and it was seen that the gallant young hero was exerting all his strength to get the pipe in his hands.

Even the owner of the building rushed up to Alton and said:

"The people are all out of the building, no lives are in peril, and the property is past saving. Tell the boy to save himself."

Jack agreed with him, and placing the speaking trumpet to his lips, sung out:

"Drop the hose and save yourself, lad!"

For answer Burke pulled his hat further down over his head and tugged away with redoubled energy.

At last he got the nozzle in his hands and turned the water loose on the fire at the further end of the room.

It struck the ceiling and spread out into a broad sheet and almost instantly extinguished the flames. But the fire in the halls and rooms below sent such a dense volume of smoke pouring into the room that he found all his tremendous struggle to be futile. That he would have to retreat was now plain. But how?

That was the question.

A long, red tongue of flame had already run up the stairway, and was now licking out in an effort to reach him.

He could not run down the only flight in the face of such a terrible destroyer.

He knew he would be curled and twisted by the intense heat like a green leaf on a red-hot stove. To stay there two minutes longer would be the end of him.

"I am in for it," he thought, "unless I leap from the window, and I'd as soon roast as die from such a fall as that."

But he staggered toward the window, gasping for breath. When about half-way the heel of his shoe stuck in a knot-hole in the floor of the room.

Instantly he dropped on his knees and felt of the hole.

"Thank God for it!" he gasped, and the next moment he thrust the nozzle into the hole, twisting it at an angle of forty-five degrees from the window, and left it there.

Then he made a break for the window and climbed out, clinging to the hose, down which he began to slide as fast as he dared to.

The moment the spectators saw him they began to yell.

"There he is! There he comes! Hold hard, Burke!"

"Steady, lad!" sung out Alton, through the speaking-trumpet. "Slide down easy—steady."

Burke was a good climber, and well understood how to "shin it" up a tree or slide down a rope, and in another minute his feet touched the ground.

The crowd and firemen yelled together in their joy at seeing the brave youth come out of the terrible peril alive.

"Burke, my boy!" cried Alton, almost hugging him in his great joy. "It was a close call for you that time."

"The closest I ever had," he replied.

"Are you hurt?"

"I don't know. I think I was scorched in a few places, but didn't have time to think about it."

"Just see what you have done!" cried Joe Pendergast. "You have fastened the nozzle up there, and now we can't throw any water!"

"What good can water do on a tinder box like that?" Alton asked.

"But we'll lose the nozzle!"

"Yes—better lose that than our Burke," was the cool reply.

Joe looked as though he didn't think so, and turned to the others to growl and sneer.

"They ought to put a block on that boy," he said. "He is always getting himself or the company into trouble. He had no business to go up there and monopolize the whole company's work."

The heat became so great that the firemen had to move back. A little later the hose dropped to the ground, having been severed by the fire.

At first it was not known that the young hero had been instrumental in saving life in the tenement house fire, and some complained that the foremen should have ordered him down from the burning building, instead of allowing him to draw the hose up to the fourth story window.

But the smoke had scarcely ceased to go up from the ruins before the truth was known.

The women and children whose lives he had saved began to tell their story and sound his praises, and Redboro' had another sensation.

The town paper spoke of him as the pride of the volunteer firemen.

Everybody took him by the hand, and congratulated him, and men who had never taken any notice of him before now took him by the hand and called him a hero.

He went back to the store and started to resume his work, but in a little while discovered that he had been burned in several places, and asked permission to go home.

The news flew around that he was hurt, and in less than an hour's time the little home of his mother was filled with

anxious visitors, all eager to know the extent of his injuries. Bessie Houghton and old Aunt Peggy Bethune came together.

"Is my boy hurt again?" old Peggy asked.

"Not much," replied Burke, who overheard the query in the next room. "Only scorched a little. I'll be at my post tomorrow all right."

"Oh, Burke!" cried Bessie, "you have risked your life again for others! How generous and noble of you to do so."

Burke laughed.

He didn't have much sentiment about him, and so replied:

"What else could I do? Stand out on the street and yell and throw water?"

"No—you did just what a hero should do," she replied. "If I were a man I'd do that way, too, I believe."

Burke looked up at her in no little surprise. He didn't think she had so much spirit.

Extending his hand to her, he said:

"I believe you would. You can understand me, then?"

"Yes—I do understand," she said, grasping his hand and shaking it warmly, "and we are the best of friends, Burke."

Old Aunt Peggy shook hands with him also, and asked several times about the extent of his hurts. He assured her that he was more fatigued than hurt—strained by the heavy pull on the hose pipe.

"I didn't know how heavy it was," he said, "and don't believe I could pull it up to that floor again even to save my life."

"I hope you won't ever have to run such a risk again," said Aunt Peggy, "though you should always stand ready to aid anyone in peril."

"Yes'm," said Burke. "That's me all over. I can't see anyone in danger of being roasted and not give a helping hand."

"Of course not, nor could any other brave man," said the benevolent old lady, "and what you did for me has made me your friend for life."

"Thanks, Aunt Peggy," said he. "I am more than paid when I hear you say that."

"And don't forget that I'm as grateful as she is, Burke," said Bessie, giving him one of her sweetest smiles as she spoke.

"That is better than gold," and he laughed as he took her pretty little dimpled hand in his and looked into her laughing brown eyes.

They all three laughed, and, as Aunt Peggy and her niece started to leave, the old lady said:

"You must come and see me—your best friend after your dear mother."

"I shall be sure to do that," he replied.

The next day Burke was at the store again, and scores of young ladies came in on pretense of buying something just to get a chance to speak to the young hero.

One day, about a week after the tenement house fire, Bessie Houghton and another young lady came into the store. Gus Dingly, the head salesman of the store (and who had long been regarded as a future junior partner in the house), came forward to wait on them.

Bessie managed to get rid of him and have Burke attend to her wants. Dingly was furiously mad, but said nothing. He had been paying attentions to Bessie for several months, so much so that many of their friends believed that it would be a match in the near future. Nothing of a tender nature had ever passed between them, and yet he was regarded as her "steady company."

From that day young Dingly, who was some ten years older than our hero, grew so jealous of the young fireman that he had great difficulty in concealing it from others.

But Burke was entirely unconscious of being the cause of

jealousy on the part of anyone, and so went on in the even tenor of his way.

One day, however, he was astonished to hear Dingly reprove him very sharply about some goods being out of place in a certain part of the store.

"Why, I didn't take them down," he replied.

"Yes, you did," persisted Dingly.

"You are mistaken—I did not."

"But I say you did—and I want you to put them up again."

Burke looked at him in amazement, and Dingly glaring back in return, asked:

"Are you going to put them up?"

"Oh, yes," and he turned to and began replacing the goods on the shelf.

When he had put up about half of them, Willie Simmons, another clerk, came from the farther end of the store, and said:

"Hello, Burke! Just wait a minute or two and I'll put them back. I didn't mean to leave them there."

"Did you take them down?" Burke asked.

"Yes—about half an hour ago."

"Mr. Dingly says you didn't," returned Burke, who knew that the head salesman was listening to what was being said.

"But I did for all that."

"I know you did," said Burke, casting a wicked look out of the corner of his eyes at Dingly. "But he insists that I did it."

"What's the matter with him? Is he off his base?"

"Too much for me. Ask me something easier."

Dingly turned red in the face as he heard the conversation, but said nothing at the time.

Burke, however, was determined to have him correct his mistake, and asked Willie to go to him and tell him that he had left the goods on the counter.

"No matter," said Dingly, "let Burke put 'em up. He is getting too important around here."

When Willie repeated his words to Burke the young hero's eyes flashed. He went over to Dingly and said:

"You know now who lied about those goods. Was it you or me?"

"You had better go to your counter and attend strictly to business, or you'll get bounced," replied Dingly.

"Who lied—you or me?" Burke asked again.

"Go to your counter, sir," ordered Dingly.

"Who lied, Dingly, you or me?"

"Go to your counter, I tell you!"

"Who lied?" Burke asked again, very coolly.

"What's the matter here?" Mr. Houghton asked, coming up at the moment.

"That boy is insolent because I ordered him to place goods back on the shelves," said Dingly.

"Is that all?" Burke asked.

"What's the matter, Burke?" Mr. Houghton asked.

Burke explained and brought up Willie to corroborate his story.

"And now I simply want to ask him who lied—he or I? If he doesn't answer, I will. He claims to be a man, but isn't manly enough to apologize when he has done another an injustice."

"Mr. Houghton," said Dingly, "either he or I must leave this store. I won't stay under the same roof with him."

He was white with rage.

"Just let it drop till you get over your anger, Gus," suggested Mr. Houghton.

"No, sir. Take your choice," and he put on his hat to leave the store.

"Well, Burke, I am sorry, but——"

"Oh, that's all right, Mr. Houghton," said Burke. "I can go

right over to Mr. Winthrop's and take a place. I am much obliged to you for your kindness to me. Good-by, Gus. Be a good boy and keep your nose clean," and picking up his hat, he walked out of the store without speaking a word to anyone else.

CHAPTER V.

DINGLEY'S CHICKENS GO HOME TO ROOST.

Burke walked over across the way into the store of Josiah Winthrop—a rival of Houghton's, and a very prosperous merchant—and said to the proprietor:

"Mr. Winthrop, you said you'd give me a place in your store whenever I wanted it. I want it right now."

"Why, yes, my boy," said the merchant, grasping his hand. "But I thought you had grown into that place over the way."

"Oh, I couldn't get along with Gus Dingley. We had a quarrel and I left."

"What did you quarrel about?"

Burke told the story, and referred him to Willie Simmons for proof of what he said.

"Well, I am glad you came over. I am in need of more help. You may set in at once if you like."

"Thanks, sir."

One of the clerks was set to showing him the marks on the goods, and they worked together faithfully till evening.

It was known all over Redboro' before bed-time that evening that Burke Halliday had left Houghton's and was clerk at Winthrop's store. The cause of his leaving was also known, because Willie Simmons and some of the other clerks had told their story.

The next day the merchant heard a dozen uncomplimentary allusions to himself ere he reached his store. He could see many of his regular lady customers going into Winthrop's store, and the sight did not please him by any means.

He knew that Burke had suddenly become the pet of the ladies of Redboro' because he had risked his life to save the lives of women and children. That never failed to touch the heart of a mother.

"See here, Gus," he said to his head manager, later in the day, "I fear you have done me a great injury in driving that boy out of the store. You were unjust to him. You should have apologized to him when you discovered that he was not to blame."

"He was too impudent. He wouldn't give me a chance," replied Dingley.

"Just look at those women going in and out over there! Some of them have been my regular customers for years. I made a mistake."

Gus made no reply. The whole shopping population seemed to be going into Winthrop's that morning. But few customers came into Houghton's.

One old lady came in to buy a spool of thread, and while it was being wrapped up, said:

"So Burke Halliday has left ye, has he?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Houghton. "I am sorry to say that he has."

"Well, I am sorry to hear it, for it won't do you any good, Mr. Houghton."

Burke and Gus had a quarrel, and one or the other had to go, and so Burke went. I am sorry, but it could not be helped. They are both rather hot-headed."

The old lady went out without saying anything more, but that night when Houghton went home he found a nest of hornets after him. His wife and daughter and Aunt Peggy pitched into him.

"I'll never spend another cent in your store," said Aunt Peggy, "as long as Mr. Nabob Dingley stays there, and, what's more, the women of Redboro' won't, either—mark my words."

Aunt Peggy Bethune was wealthy—worth three times as much as the Houghtons—and it was believed that Mrs. Houghton and Bessie would fall to her property at her death. She was very much attached to her niece and grand-niece, but very independent and headstrong.

Her anger worried him more than that of his wife and daughter, for at one time she threatened to give Burke money enough to enable him to set up a store of his own.

But little sleep came to him that night, and the next morning ate his breakfast in moody silence, and left the house to return to his store.

The experience of that day made him sick. His average sales dropped off more than one-half.

"See here, Gus," he said to Dingley—"you see how this is. I am being ruined. You must see Burke to-night, make up with him, and get him to come back here. I am willing to double his salary to get him back."

That was a tough thing on Gus, but he wanted to hold his own with the merchant, as he had serious hopes of marrying Bessie and becoming a full partner in the store.

"Don't you think it will blow over in a few days?" Dingley asked.

"Yes, it will blow me over, and that's just what I don't want. Winthrop will be sure to keep all the customers he can, and when the women folks get mad and take queer notions about things, there's no telling how far they may go."

"I'll try and see him to-night," said Dingley.

"See him without fail, and make it all right with him," said Mr. Houghton.

A few minutes after his conversation with Dingley Mr. Houghton saw Aunt Peggy Bethune enter Winthrop's store.

She was alone, and it was no telling how far she would go in her indignation.

Burke saw her coming, and hastened to meet her, greeting her as "dear Aunt Peggy," to her great delight.

"And so you have left us, lad?" she said.

"Oh, no, Aunt Peggy, I have only left the store. I am going to come and see you just the same. Can I sell you anything to-day?"

"Yes, I guess you can. I want to get a black silk gown."

Burke waited on her, and before she left she had bought a silk dress for herself and one for Bessie.

That night Burke was down at the engine-house of the Wide Awakes, when one of the firemen came to him and said:

"Dingley wants to see you downstairs."

"The deuce!"

"Yes; he asked me to tell you so."

"What in thunder does he want?"

"Hanged if I know. Guess he wants a fight."

"Well, he can have that if he wants it," and he at once went downstairs and met Dingley in front of the engine-house.

"Did you send for me?" he asked.

"Yes. I want to talk with you, and make amends for the injustice I did you."

"Why have you waited so long about it?" Burke asked, very coldly.

"Because I was too mad at the way you pitched into me. Come and take a walk with me, and I'll make it all right with you."

"I don't care to take any walk with you. You lied about me and had me bounced, and then waited three days to make the apology that was due. I don't want anything to do with you, Gus Dingley."

Gus was in a rage at being talked to that way by a beardless

youth. But he did not show it in the darkness that surrounded them.

"That's all right, Burke," he said, stiffly. "If you don't want me to apologize, I won't do it. I'll give you the message Mr. Houghton sent, though. He says that if you will come back to the store he will double your salary."

"Did he say that?"

"Yes. That's what I came to tell you."

"Well, tell him again that you and I can't work under the same roof—that he must first give you the grand bounce before he can get me back at any price," and with that Burke turned and went upstairs into the hall again.

Dingly was in a furious rage. He went away, hissing between his clenched teeth:

"The insolent cub. Give me the grand bounce, eh! I'll give him the grand thrashing if he ever speaks to me again."

He made a report to Mr. Houghton the next morning to the effect that he could do nothing with Burke, saying:

"He was insulting to me and disrespectful to you, and said he wouldn't come back at any price."

Houghton was astonished as well as dismayed. He had heard through Aunt Peggy that all the women in Redboro' were going to ignore his store in the future. That meant utter ruin to his business, as nine out of every ten dollars in his trade came from the women.

"This is bad business, Gus," he said, shaking his head.

"It will not last a week," said Gus.

"I don't want it to last a day longer. When a man's neighbors turn against him he might as well move away at once."

"Do you think such a cub as Burke Halliday can move a whole community to wrong a reputable citizen like you?"

"Whether I think it or not, you can see for yourself what is being done. It isn't the wrong to me, but the injustice to him, that the people are concerned about."

"But why should they be concerned about him, I'd like to know?"

"Oh, you know well enough that he has behaved like a hero at two fires. You forced me to discharge him—which was wrong in both of us. You accused him wrongfully, and didn't correct it when you found out your mistake."

Just then Bessie and Aunt Peggy came into the store. Gus hastened to wait on them. They didn't wish to buy anything, but treated Dingly so coldly as to give him a chill.

He was overwhelmed by Bessie's freezing manner toward him, and as for Aunt Peggy, she wouldn't even speak to him. Then he realized for the first time that the prejudice included him as much as it did the merchant.

But he made up his mind to explain matters to the fair Bessie in a way that would remove all blame from his own shoulders, and with that object in view he called at the house where he had been so often welcomed.

To his intense surprise and mortification Bessie sent word to him in the parlor that she was not at home.

He went away conscious that it was all up with him in that quarter. He then began to realize how far-reaching a little act of injustice was under certain circumstances. But he swore to treasure it all up against Burke, and get a sweet revenge whenever he could do so without injury to himself.

The next day Mr. Houghton called him aside and suggested that he sever his connection with the store.

"I am ruined if you do not go," he said.

"And I am ruined if I do go," was the reply.

"I think not," said the merchant. "You have nothing but your services to sell, while I have many thousands of dollars' worth of goods on my hands which must be sold."

Dingly left the store, and in a day or two the trade began to come back to the house, and the merchant smiled faintly over the slight turning of the current.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LEAP FOR LIFE.

After leaving Houghton's store Gus Dingly paid a visit to several of the larger dry goods stores in Redboro', not doubting that such a well-known salesman could easily make an engagement.

But the first store he entered received him coldly, the proprietor saying:

"I don't know that you could bring me any trade. Just now every woman in town seems to be down on you."

"Down on me?"

"Yes, they say you caused Burke Halliday to be discharged from Houghton's."

Dingly made no reply.

He left and applied at another store, where he was told that his presence there would drive trade away.

That broke him all up, and he went out to meditate on the mutability of human affairs.

"That cub has done all this," he said to himself. "He has been talking about me behind my back, and making people believe that I have done him a great wrong. He is now getting better pay than ever in his life before, while I am getting nothing at all. Where is the wrong there, I'd like to know? Who is wronged—he or I? Oh, I'll get even with him if I have to spend every dollar of my savings to do it!"

It soon became known to everybody in Redboro' that Gus Dingly had failed to secure another position in town—that the merchants were afraid to employ him, for fear of the loss of trade on account of his treatment of young Halliday.

Thus matters stood when Burke called at Mr. Houghton's residence to pay his respects to old Aunt Peggy and the rest of the family. The old lady greeted him cordially, saying:

"You are not a good boy, Burke, or you would have called before this."

"Yes—that's just what I think," said Bessie, as she gave him her hand.

"Really, I thought you were all mad with me," he replied.

"Mad at you!" exclaimed Aunt Peggy. "You must have a very poor opinion of us, lad!"

"Burke," said Mr. Houghton, coming forward and giving him a cordial greeting. "I am glad you have called. I wanted to see you in regard to the message you sent me by Gus. I did not expect that of you."

"Mr. Houghton, please tell me what he said to you," Burke asked.

"He said you were insolent to him and disrespectful to me, and that you would not come back at any price."

"Ah, I thought so."

"Thought what?"

"That he had not told you the truth."

"How? What is it?"

"It is this. When he spoke to me about my returning to the store I repeated to him his own words to you, that he and I could not work under the same roof, and that until you gave him the grand bounce I would not return at any price. That was all I said—no more, no less."

"Ah! he did not tell me that," said the merchant.

"Of course not. There is nothing of the man about Gus Dingly."

"I begin to believe you there; but I had known him a long time, and thought that some day I would take him into partnership. I am glad I found him out."

Burke spent an hour with the family—the first time in his life he was ever in such refined surroundings on a level of

equality. Bessie sang and played for him, and old Aunt Peggy amused him with her quaint, motherly way.

Before he left Mr. Houghton said to him:

"There is a place in the store for you whenever you wish to come back, Burke, and at double your former salary."

"Thanks, sir. I shall try to get back as soon as I can without giving offense to anyone else."

"Oh, I do hope you will," said Bessie.

"That's right," said the merchant; "always act honorably with everybody. I would not have you leave your present place in any other way."

At the door Bessie whispered softly to him:

"We all like you, Burke. You will come to see us often, will you not?"

"Yes—if—if you wish me to," he half stammered.

"I do wish it," she said, "and tell Mamie to come, too."

Burke went away with a light heart.

Pretty Bessie Houghton had held his hand in her own, and told him she wanted him to come to see her. That was enough to make any susceptible youth feel lighthearted.

That night a great storm came up and the rain came down in torrents. When the people went about their daily work the next morning they found the river rapidly rising.

Soon it became an angry, roaring, rushing torrent, that threatened great damage to the town. By noon it was out of its banks and rushing through the lower streets, and many people began to be alarmed.

Two or three small houses, the occupants of which had fled to other quarters, were swept away, and crowds assembled at different points to see what other houses would follow.

It was at this point that the fire alarm startled everybody in the town, and men wondered if they would have to battle with two antagonistic elements at the same time.

Every man of the two companies promptly responded to the call, and by the time the firemen reached their engines it was known that the fire was in one of the factories down on the river front.

Down through the streets rushed the engines, and when they turned into River street the brave firemen found themselves knee-deep in water.

But that did not deter them a single moment. They dashed forward and drew their engines through the water at the top of their speed.

Just as the Wide Awakes, who were again the first to reach the fire, turned on the water, they heard a scream from a window of the third floor.

They looked up and saw a young girl leaning far out and shrieking for help.

"My God!" cried Jack Alton, the foreman, "I thought the girls had all escaped."

"So did I," said another fireman, "and we can't get at them."

"No, I don't see how we can."

The water had risen to the first floor of the mill. The fire had enveloped all the front of the building, and cut off both ingress and egress.

While Alton and others were deliberating how to get at the poor girl they heard a splash in the water.

"There goes Burke Halliday!" cried someone in the crowd, and every eye was turned in that direction.

Sure enough, it was the young fireman who had leaped into the water.

"Come back, Burke!" called Alton, the foreman, but the young hero either did not hear or would not obey.

He swam out alongside the mill to where the water was ten feet deep, right under one of the windows on the first floor.

There he began climbing up into the window, and then his object was plain to everyone present.

"Come back! come back!" cried Alton, with his trumpet, "You are too late!"

Burke disappeared through the window, and a murmur went up from the crowd that the daring young fellow would never get out of the mill alive.

One, two, three minutes passed, and the suspense became painful to those who were standing about in the water that flowed through the streets.

The young girl was still at the window, screaming for somebody to save her.

The smoke was pouring out of every window in the mill, and under the window where she was the water was ten feet deep, making it impossible for a ladder to be placed there.

She was on the point of giving up and sinking down in despair when she felt herself touched on the shoulder from behind.

She wheeled around and caught hold of Burke Halliday, but did not know who he was in that dense volume of black smoke.

"Keep cool and we'll get out all right," said Burke, in very assuring tones.

"Save me—save me!" she gasped, and then sank into a swoon into his arms.

"This is bad business," said Burke, as he laid her on his left arm. "If she had kept her wits it would have been easier for me."

He hastened to lean out of the window to get a glimpse of fresh air, as it seemed as if he would not be able to live another minute if he did not.

Then he heard a great shout from below as the people caught a glimpse of him. He remembered that, and then, as the merciless flames touched him behind, he gathered the young girl tightly to his breast and leaped from the window into the raging waters below.

CHAPTER VII.

OUT OF THE FIRE INTO THE FLOOD.

The leap was a terrible one.

It was a leap for life, as every eye-witness knew.

As the two came down through the smoke into the water the spectators held their breath in painful suspense.

Splash! They had struck the water.

A cry of horror went up from the crowd as they saw them disappear under the rushing torrent.

There were no boats near to go to their assistance.

The good right arm of the brave young fireman was seen battling with the current in a desperate effort to keep the girl's head above the water.

That was more than Jack Alton could stand. He threw away his fireman's hat, kicked off his heavy boots and plunged into the raging current to swim to the assistance of his young friend.

"Burke, my lad!" he called to the young hero when he came up to him, "give me the girl and take care of yourself!"

Burke was almost exhausted.

He recognized Jack's voice, but was so blinded by the smoke he had leaped out of that he could not see him.

"Take hold of her, Jack," he said.

Jack caught hold of the girl. She had been restored to consciousness by the plunge into the cold water, and, as soon as she knew she was in the river, she uttered shriek after shriek that was heard by half the people of the town.

"Keep quiet," said Jack, soothingly, "and we'll get you out all right."

Burke and Jack reached the shore with her, where the firemen soon relieved them, taking the girl away and sending her to her home in the lower part of the village.

The firemen then gathered around Burke and covered him with congratulations. He washed and rubbed his eyes till he could use them again, saying as he did so:

"It was a close call, boys."

"The closest I ever saw," said Jack.

The mill went down in the rising waters, and was swept away on the flood—that is, the ashes and charred pieces did.

The firemen prevented the spread of the conflagration, and saved the buildings on either side of the mill. Whenever a fire got a few minutes' start in a frame building, it was an exceedingly difficult job to save it. The fire companies, in almost every case, found that they had to simply prevent the spread of the flames and save human life whenever imperiled.

Burke and Alton went to their homes to put on dry clothes, while the two companies returned to their quarters.

The flood continued to rise, and all the mills along the river were threatened with very serious damage, if not total destruction. The excitement growing out of that peril caused a good many people to forget for the time being the heroic rescue of the young mill girl.

But when the waters began to subside, and the people saw that but little damage was done, they thought of the young girl and her terrible experience.

Burke had not even learned her name at noon the next day, when old Aunt Peggy came into the store and told him.

"Her name is Aggie Wayne, a very poor girl, who has to earn every cent she gets," said the good old lady, "and she is very ill at her boarding-house."

"I am sorry to hear that," remarked Burke. "We shall all pitch in and make up a purse for her to-night down at the engine-house."

"You needn't bother about that," she returned. "I'll see that she doesn't lack for anything."

"Ah! We couldn't get along without you, Aunt Peggy," said Burke. "How the poor would suffer if you were to leave us, or cease to be as good and generous as you are now!"

"That'll do, Burke. I can't save them as you do, but I'll do the best I can. You have taught me a lesson about one doing his or her best whenever anything is to be done."

Aggie Wayne was a poor orphan child of sixteen years of age who had been working in the mill about a year. She was a frail, beautiful girl, with flaxen hair and blue eyes. Many knew her as the "silent beauty," because of her disposition to be quiet and uncommunicative. But she was very beautiful, and quite well educated for one of her years.

She had come to the village with her widowed mother two years before the opening of our story. The mother died, and the orphaned daughter went to work in a mill.

The shock of the alarm of fire had caused her to fall down in a faint, and she was thus overlooked and left in the burning building when the other girls were taken out.

When the intense heat roused her to consciousness again, she sprang up and rushed to the window, screaming for help. It was at that moment that Burke saw her. The next moment he was in the water swimming to her rescue.

The young girl had a high fever for over a week after the fire, during which time she did not recognize anyone. But she had the best of attention, for old Aunt Peggy Bethune had so ordered.

In the meantime, everybody in the town was praising the gallant young hero for his splendid feat on the day of the fire.

When Aggie Wayne had sufficiently recovered to hear the story of her rescue she was told all about it. She was as grateful as a human heart could be, and asked that Burke be sent for that she might thank him in person.

Burke came and sat by her bedside.

She was more beautiful, he thought, than any girl he had ever seen, and when she gave him her hand and thanked him, he said:

"I am glad I was able to do as much as I did, Miss Wayne, but I think we both have another man to thank for our lives."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. If Jack Alton had not come to my assistance when we were in the water we would both have drowned. I felt that I could not hold out another minute."

"Then I must thank him, too. Oh, how can I ever pay the debt of gratitude I owe!"

"Oh, don't think about that," he said. "Just try to get well and let us see you out on the streets alive and well and happy, and we will all rejoice that we had a hand in pulling you through."

"I don't know but that it would have been better for me if you had let me perish in the flames. I am not strong, and now I am going in debt to Mrs. Hart, my landlady, for my board. How I am ever to pay her I don't know."

Mrs. Hart was sitting by the bedside with Burke. She was a kind, motherly old lady.

"Don't you worry about that, Aggie," she said. "Your board and doctor's bill are both paid by a good lady."

Aggie opened wide her big blue eyes and stared at Mrs. Hart.

"Ah! That was good Aunt Peggy Bethune," said Burke. "God bless her dear old soul! She never deserts one in distress. Don't worry. She will see that you have another place just as soon as you are strong enough to go to work again."

Tears filled the blue eyes again, and the young girl's emotion was too great to allow her to express her feelings. Burke went away to tell Jack Alton what a sweet girl she was.

CHAPTER VIII.

BURKE AND THE STRANGER.

About a month after the destruction of the mill Burke was accosted on the street by an elderly man, who asked if he lived in the town.

"Yes, I think I do," was the reply.

"You know a good many people here, do you not?"

"Oh, yes—I think I do."

"Do you know of a widow with one child—a Mrs. Wayne? Her daughter is named Aggie."

"Wayne—Wayne," repeated Burke. "Yes—seems to me I do. The widow has gone away from Redboro', though."

"Gone away! Where?"

"I really don't know. She's been dead over a year."

The man started as if stung.

"Dead!" he repeated.

"Yes; she is buried over in the graveyard on the other side of the river," and Burke pointed in the direction of the Redboro' cemetery as he spoke.

The man gazed over the river in silence for a moment or two and then said:

"The daughter—what became of her?"

"Aggie is here—in a millinery shop down on Main street—and is the handsomest girl in Redboro'."

"Whose shop is she in?"

"Miss Higgins'. You'll see the name on a sign over the door as you go down the street—that is, if you can read."

"Oh, I think I can read," said the man, smiling.

"Think you can! Don't you know whether you can or not? Are you uncertain, too?"

The man laughed and asked:

"What's your name, young man?"

"Hanged if I know," replied Burke, and he turned away to go about his business.

"That boy is a jolly young dog," remarked the stranger, as he turned to make his way down the street in the direction of Miss Sarah Higgins' millinery shop.

"I wonder what he wants to know about Aggie for?" Burke thought, as he went back to the store. "She is doing very well now, since Aunt Peggy Bethune got her a place at Miss Higgins'. Maybe he is a relative. I'll ask her when I see her again."

Burke thought no more about it, and in a little while it slipped from his memory altogether.

The man who had accosted him was middle-aged and well dressed. But there was a look of shrewd selfishness about him that almost any good business man would notice.

He was stopping at the Redboro' House, the most prominent hotel in the busy little town, registered as Mr. Joseph Seymour.

Mr. Seymour passed the millinery shop, and looked in as he did so. He saw the tall, angular Miss Higgins and young Aggie Wayne waiting on a couple of lady customers.

They did not notice him, and in a little while he came by again and stopped to look at some bonnets and flowers which were displayed in the little window.

Standing there, he obtained a good look at the young girl. She was neatly dressed, and was very beautiful, he thought.

After a while he went away and strolled about the town, looking at the mills and factories along the river bank.

Meeting with black Pete, who had wandered off from the engine-house a block or two, he asked:

"Boy, can you tell me what mills those are over there on the other side of the river?"

"Yes, sah," answered Pete, very promptly. "Dem is de Spice Mills, an' deudder one is de Wool Mills."

The man looked over at the mills and saw that the boy had told him the truth. He then engaged him in conversation, and in a few minutes black Pete was in his glory, telling all he knew about the place to a stranger.

He told about the last fire, pointing out the ruins of the mill, which could now be seen from almost any point along the river.

Of course, the story of Burke's rescue of Aggie Wayne had to be told, and the man at once became interested.

"Where does this young fellow you speak of stay?" he asked.

"Up at Winfrop's store," was the reply.

"Where is it?"

Pete pointed it out to him, and he wended his way in that direction.

The man did not enter the store, but contented himself with merely looking in as he passed the door.

He saw Burke waiting on a farmer who was buying some dry goods, and then passed on up the street.

That evening at the hotel he heard some of the young firemen talking, and again heard the story of Burke and Aggie Wayne repeated.

"It was a good thing for her," said one of the firemen.

"How so?"

"Why, it made her acquainted with old Aunt Peggy Bethune, who has never let her want for anything since. Just see how comfortable she is fixed there at Miss Higgins'."

"Yes, and I believe Jack is mashed on her."

"Is that so?"

"Yes; I've seen him with her several times."

"She is very young yet."

"Yes, and very beautiful."

"Guess Burke will go sneaking round her, too," said the other, laughing.

"Oh, he is too young for that, you know."

"Yes, he is pretty young to go sparkling, but the women all pet him so that they'll soon turn his head."

"Burke has a pretty hard head."

"So he has, but the women can turn the hardest heads the world ever saw."

The two young firemen laughed, but the stranger looked grave.

Long after they went away he sat there looking at vacancy, apparently absorbed in deep meditation.

A week later Mr. Seymour called at the cottage where lived the Widow Hart, with whom Aggie Wayne boarded, to ask for room and board, saying:

"I am a stranger in Redboro', madam," and then, after a pause, added, "and am here on business that may detain me one or two months. I am not accustomed to living at hotels, though I am well able to do so. On making inquiries for a private boarding-house, I was directed to call here. I like your place, and will pay whatever sum you may ask."

Mrs. Hart was a poor woman, who had to resort to many ways and means to make both ends meet. She had no extra room vacant, and was at a loss to know what to do, when the thought occurred to her that she might be able to accommodate him if she could get Aggie to share her room with her during the time he remained, and let him have the one she occupied.

She told him to call again the next day, and that she might be able to make room for him.

Of course Aggie consented, and the next day Mr. Joseph Seymour was received at the cottage as a boarder.

When Aggie came home in the evening she was introduced to him. He seemed to be a very agreeable sort of a man, being satisfied with everything that was done for his comfort.

The widow was very communicative, and in a little while he had heard the story of Aggie's rescue for the twentieth time since he landed in Redboro'.

One evening Burke met Aggie going home from the store, and joined her.

She was always glad to see him. He was her young hero.

"We have a new boarder at our house," she said, as they walked along the street in the gathering twilight.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Oh, you don't know him, I guess. He is a gentlemen who came here on business a few days ago. He is a very nice man, but old enough to be my father."

That was all that was said about him at the time. Burke lingered at the gate talking to the young girl when Mr. Seymour came along.

"Oh, here's Mr. Seymour," said Aggie. "Mr. Seymour, this is Burke Halliday, whom you have heard us speak of several times."

Seymour looked at him in no little surprise. He had heard so much of the young volunteer fireman that he had expected to see a different looking youth. Instantly both of them remembered their first meeting, and of the comical nature of their conversation on that occasion.

"We have met before, sir," said Burke, smiling good-naturedly.

"Yes, I believe we have," he replied.

"Why, I thought I heard you say you had never met Burke!" exclaimed Aggie.

"So you did, but I did not know this young man was he," and he extended his hand to Burke, who shook it warmly.

"Just so," said Burke, "and I did not know you were Mr. Seymour. So you see how uncertain everything is in this little town of ours."

"I am very glad to meet you, Burke," said Seymour, "and hope to have the pleasure of a visit from you some evening. I left the hotel because of the noise and confusion there in the bar-room downstairs."

"Yes, said Burke. "They do get pretty lively down there sometimes."

"Won't you come in, Burke?" Aggie asked. "Mrs. Hart will be glad to see you, and you know how I do like to have you talk to me."

"Thanks, but I haven't time now," answered Burke, "but I may call to-morrow evening. I want to tell you something."

"Oh, now I can't sleep a wink to-night!" she exclaimed, laughing. "You have excited my curiosity, and I've got to wait till to-morrow night. How cruel of you!"

"There now," said Burke, "just say I was talking nonsense and think no more about it. I'll come and see you to-morrow night," and with that he pressed her hand in his, bowed to Seymour and went away.

"What a dear, good fellow he is!" said Aggie, gazing after him as he walked off down the street.

"Why don't you set your cap for him?" Seymour asked, in a jocular way.

"Oh, I would, but so many other girls in the town are after him that I don't think I could have any show. But then, you know, he is but a boy yet, and I am only a little girl."

"He has a big reputation for one so young."

"Yes, indeed. His reputation is deserved, too, for he is every inch a hero."

He escorted her into the house and retired to his room, while Aggie went into Mrs. Hart's room to lay aside her work dress.

CHAPTER IX.

KNOCKED DOWN AND LEFT FOR DEAD.

On his way down the street, after leaving Aggie Wayne at the gate, Burke Halliday was in a deep study.

He recollects his first meeting with Seymour, and now wondered why he had established himself in the same house where Aggie was boarding.

"There's something queer about it," he muttered. "He inquired after her mother, and was astonished when I told him Mrs. Wayne was dead. Hanged if I don't watch him. I've a great mind to tell Jack about it."

He ate his supper in silence, and then went down to the Wide Awake engine-house. There he met Jack Alton, the foreman, who had saved him from drowning on the day of the mill fire.

"Jack, I have something to tell you," he said, and taking Alton off to a corner of the room, he told him the story.

Jack shook his head.

"The old rascal is up to something, lad," he said. "You want to watch him."

"Just what I think, but I don't see how I can watch him. I am confined at the store all day long."

"Tell the girl about it. Put her on her guard against him," suggested Jack.

"Yes, I think that is the best thing to do," and then they dropped the matter and rejoined the other firemen who had come in to spend an hour in conversation.

"I say, Burke," said one of the men, "just a while ago I heard Gus Dingly say he would cowhide you if he heard anything more from you."

"The deuce you did!"

"Yes. Somebody had told him something you had said about him, and he was very mad about it."

"Somebody has been making up a yarn, then," said Burke, "for I am sure I have not said anything about him behind his back."

"Well, I don't know what it was he heard. I only know that

he was in a rage, and said he'd give you the cowhide if he heard anything more from you."

Burke laughed and remarked:

"When he begins that business he'll have a big circus on hand, I'm thinking."

Burke remained till a late hour, and then started home all alone.

Just as he turned into Meadow Lane a man rushed upon him and dealt him a blow on the head that felled him senseless to the earth.

A thousand stars seemed to dance before his eyes, and then all was darkness and oblivion.

When he came to he found himself lying where he had fallen, weak from loss of blood and chilled to the marrow.

"Lord, how my head hurts!" he moaned, as he raised a hand to his head and felt of the matted hair and blood.

He was almost too weak to rise, and he lay there for some time, hoping that somebody would come along who would stand him on his feet. But after a while he decided that he had better try to get up and go home, or to the drug store.

So he made the effort, and succeeded first in raising himself on his elbow. His head felt as if it was heavier than all the rest of his body.

On his feet he reeled and staggered like a drunken man, and twice he had to clutch the fence near where he fell to steady himself.

"My God!" he groaned, "I am almost dead! Somebody must have hit me with an axe."

There was a little drug store not far from where he was, kept by an old man whose son was a physician. Burke staggered up to the door and knocked with a small stone which he had picked up.

The druggist got up out of bed and opened the door.

"Hello!" exclaimed he, on seeing the blood-covered person before him by the aid of his lamp. "Who are you, and what's the matter?"

"I am Burke Halliday," replied our hero, staggering into the store, "and I am nearly dead. Send for the doctor."

"My gracious!" gasped the druggist, "you have bled like an ox! Sit down till I call my son."

He pushed Burke gently into a chair and closed the door. Then he hastened upstairs to call his son, the doctor.

In a few minutes the doctor came down with his father, and was amazed at what he saw.

"You are hurt," he said. "Come to the lounge in the back room and let me see the extent of the wound."

He led our hero into the back room, where stood a leather-covered lounge. There he stripped him of his coat and vest and made him lie down on the lounge with his head resting a little over the end.

With a basin of warm water and a sponge, he bathed his head till all the clotted blood was washed away.

Then he saw the nature of the wound.

He had been struck with a heavy, blunt instrument of some kind.

"How did this happen, Burke?" he asked.

"I was coming home from the engine-house," replied Burke, "and when I turned into Meadow Lane somebody rushed at me and gave me a blow on the head. That's all I know about it."

"Well, it's a wonder you know anything at all about it," said the doctor, "for the blow was undoubtedly intended to lay you out for good."

"Yes," remarked the old druggist, who had held the lamp while the doctor dressed the wound. "It was an awful blow."

"It won't kill me, will it, doctor?"

"Oh, I guess not. You have pulled through some pretty

tight places, and I guess you will have your usual good luck again."

"I'm pretty hard to kill, I guess. Can I go home now?"

"I don't know about that. I would advise you to stay here to-night and not alarm your mother and sister by going home at this time of night, wounded as you are."

"You are right, doctor. I'll stay here if you can give me a bed."

"You can have my bed, and I'll lie here on this lounge."

"No," said the old druggist. "I'll lie here, and you can take my bed. You can watch him then, if necessary."

Thus it was arranged, and he was assisted upstairs to a bed.

The young doctor remained with him through the night, trying to keep down the fever, which he feared would follow such a wound as that.

But the fever came before daylight, and the case became very serious. The young hero began to grow delirious.

Soon after sunrise his mother and sister were sent for, and they came with all haste to see him.

"He is badly hurt, madam," said the doctor to Mrs. Halliday, "but you must control yourself and not excite him in the least. He is not himself now, and any excitement may prove fatal at any moment."

Mrs. Halliday promised to be calm, and braced herself for the ordeal. Mamie was as firm as her mother, and both were admitted to his bedside.

"Burke," called his mother. "Burke—do you know me?"

He looked at her in a vacant sort of way, and said:

"Keep quiet and I'll get you out all right."

A groan escaped the anguished mother's lips as she saw that he was delirious.

"Yes—yes—cling to me now, and I'll get you out. Never mind the fire. I'll get you out. My God! I've got to jump for it! It's a terrible alternative, but I'll save her if I perish in the attempt."

"He thinks he is in the mill fire," said the doctor.

"Oh, doctor, can you save him?" sobbed the mother.

"I don't think you need have any serious apprehensions, ma'am," the doctor replied. "I have seen much worse cases than his pull through."

"Do you know how he was hurt?"

"He said a man rushed on him in the dark, just as he turned into Meadow Lane, and dealt him a stunning blow. That was all he recollects about it, nor does he have any idea who his assailant was."

"Oh, somebody is trying to murder my brave boy!" and the heartbroken mother wrung her hands in anguish as she spoke.

The news soon spread over the town, and the most intense excitement prevailed. Scores of friends rushed to the drug store to see him. Only a few of his most intimate friends were admitted to his bedside.

Jack Alton left his work to go to him, and he was so indignant as to say:

"If we can find the wretch who struck him, we'll save the courts the trouble of punishing him, if we can get a rope strong enough to sustain his weight."

"Yes," spoke up several other firemen, "we'll hang him to the first tree."

"I think I know the man," said one.

"Who is he?" cried a dozen at once.

"Gus Dingly."

There was a silence of two whole minutes, when the first speaker continued:

"I heard Gus last night make a threat to cowhide him if he ever heard anything more from him."

There was an ominous frown on the faces of many of the firemen present. They recollects the feeling in the town re-

garding Gus and Burke, and the more they thought about it the more indignant they became.

"Let's see Dingly about it," said one.

"Yes, let's see what he says about it," and about a score set out to find Gus and make him give an account of himself.

They soon found him.

He was discussing the attack on the young fireman with a couple of friends when the party came up to him.

"Gus Dingly," said one of the firemen, "you were heard to make threats against Burke Halliday last night. He has been almost killed in a very cowardly way. If you can't prove that you didn't do it we'll hang you to yonder tree in ten minutes."

Gus turned pale as death.

He saw that the Wide Awakes meant business.

"I did make a threat to cowhide him," he said, "but I never saw him at all during last night."

"We don't propose to take your word for that. Where were you last night?"

"I was with a party of friends at the hotel, playing billiards till midnight."

"Can you prove that?"

"Yes—by a dozen men."

"Come to the hotel with us."

They took him to the hotel, and ere they reached the house the party had swelled to more than two hundred.

The landlord and barkeeper said that Gus had been in the hotel from eight o'clock till midnight, and that he went away with Dick Halsey.

"Yes, and he was with me the rest of the night," said Dick, who was in the crowd.

"Are you sure of that, Dick?"

"Yes. He slept with me."

"Well, that lets you out, Dingly," said the leader of the would-be lynchers. "We were quite sure you were the man. We are not sure now that you did not get the job done."

"You have no right to say anything of the kind, sir," said a friend of Dingly's. "He is as honest a man as you are, and—"

"Don't give us any lip, or we'll chuck you into the river as quick as a wink," returned the fireman.

"Try it!" said the man, defiantly.

They seized him, and in another minute were rushing him off to the river.

CHAPTER X.

A WILY OLD ROGUE'S WOOING.

The hotheaded young man who had been so foolish as to defy a score of excited firemen cooled down very quickly when he saw that they were about to make good their threat.

"I'll take back what I said," he cried. "I did not mean it. I beg your pardon, gentlemen."

"Oh, turn the fellow loose," said Jack Alton, who was in the party. "He is not the man we are after."

They turned him loose, and he was the worst scared man in the town at that moment. He could not swim, and had they thrown him into the river he would have drowned, unless somebody drew him out again.

When the women heard the news they called at the drug store in dozens and twenties, to offer their services. Old Aunt Peggy came, and with her Bessie Houghton and Aggie Wayne.

When told that Burke was delirious and constantly talking about the mill fire, and the leap for life in the swollen river, Aggie broke down and wept hysterically.

"Oh, how cruel it was to try to kill one who never refuses to risk his own life to save the lives of others!"

"Cruel—cruel!" sobbed Bessie Houghton.

"The man who did it ought to be left in a burning house somewhere," said Aunt Peggy, wiping a tear from her eyes.

"Even then Burke would try to save him," said Aggie. "Oh, he was as good as he was brave!"

The doctor told them that he thought Burke would pull through all right. On the way back home Aunt Peggy Bethune saw the mayor, and told him to offer a reward of five hundred dollars for the arrest and conviction of the assailants of the youth.

"I am not a vindictive woman," she said to the mayor, "but we want to protect the community from such criminals."

"Yes—and the best way to do it is to make the whole people go on the hunt for them by offering big rewards."

"I'll make it a thousand if you think it necessary," said Aunt Peggy.

"I think five hundred dollars are enough," replied the mayor, as he sat down to write out the notice of reward.

The big reward created more excitement in the town.

Everybody wondered who the assailant was, and what was his motive.

It was a puzzle to everyone who undertook to do much thinking on the matter.

It was known that he had but two enemies in Redboro', one of whom was not so much an enemy as he was envious—and they were Gus Dingly and Joe Pendergast.

Joe had been so indiscreet as to speak disparagingly of him on several occasions. But having been rebuked by some of the ladies, he soon ceased doing so as a matter of policy.

But Gus Dingly had threatened to cowhide him, and that naturally set the eye of suspicion gazing in his direction.

After he had proved an alibi to the satisfaction of the Wide Awakes there were some people who did not hesitate to hint that Gus had probably hired some rascal to knock him on the head.

Everywhere he went after that he was an object of suspicion, and many of his acquaintances gradually drew away from him.

By degrees Burke recovered, but it was at least a month ere he was able to go out of his room.

By that time the excitement had dwindled down into a single question—who struck Burke Halliday?

Every evening after she came home from the millinery store Aggie Wayne, accompanied by another young girl of her own age, called to inquire after him. Mr. Seymour had several times offered to go with her, but she declined his offer.

"You don't know how the girls would tease me," she said, "if they saw you going with me on the street."

"Oh, that's all the objection you have, eh?"

"Yes, sir, that's all."

"Oh, well, I guess you are right in objecting, as it is not pleasant to be teased about anything. But I assure you it would be a great pleasure to go with you anywhere."

"I didn't know that," and she blushed.

"Yes, and when I saw you walking with young Halliday I wished myself young again, that I might walk with you, too."

"Oh, as for Burke, nobody would tease me about him. All the girls want him to walk with them."

"Yes, I understand. I am too old for one so young as you."

Aggie did not know how to answer him. She never had anyone to talk to her that way before.

"If they wouldn't tease me," she said, "I wouldn't mind."

"Well, they shall not tease you on my account."

"Please don't be angry with me," she said.

"Of course not. I want you to be as happy as you deserve to be. If you will only talk with me when you come in of evenings I should be ever so pleased to sit with you, and read and talk and tell you of the countries I have visited."

Aggie never had any man take so much interest in her before, and felt very much flattered at what he said.

"When I work very hard at the store," she replied, "I am afraid I am too tired to talk to anyone."

"You ought not to have to work at all, my dear young friend. You are not strong enough."

"But I am obliged to work," and she laughed softly. "I am poor, and have to eat and wear clothes just like other girls."

"Oh, you ought to marry a man who can keep you in comfort, with servants, carriage, fine house and all that."

"Wouldn't that be nice? If you know of such a man who will take pity on a poor little girl like me, why just send him along."

"Would you marry him even if you did not love him?" he asked, looking her full in the face.

"I—I—really don't know, sir," she answered, "but I would try very hard to love him if he was kind and good, and not too ugly."

He laughed and suggested:

"And not too old, eh?"

"Oh, if he was very old I might be a young widow some day, and very rich," and she laughed heartily.

"Yes, that's very true. I've known of several instances of that kind. Now, listen to me, Aggie Wayne. I am old enough to be your father. I have been married once, but have been a widower for ten years, and have no children. I am very rich, and can give a wife a fine house to live in, silks and diamonds to wear, carriage, horses and plenty of servants. But I have never thought of marrying until I met you."

"Met me!" she faltered, turning very pale.

"Yes. I have learned to love you, Aggie, for my forty-five-year-old heart is still young enough to love. If you will be my wife you shall have all that money can purchase—a fine house, silks, diamonds, carriages, servants, and everything you may want. I want you to love and pet you—to be my idol—my darling."

Aggie sat in the chair like one utterly dumfounded. She did not know what to say or think.

"I know perfectly well you do not love me," he continued, "but now that I have told you my feelings toward you, you can try to love me. Don't make any promise now—I don't want you to do that. Just take a week or ten days to think over it, and try to love me. I will be satisfied then. Will you do that, Aggie?"

"Yes," she half whispered.

"Thanks. I only want to make you happy all your life, which you can never be working as you do now for a mere pittance."

He left her then, and she ran up to her room, her head in a whirl and her young heart in a flutter.

She did not love him—had never given him a thought when out of his presence. But the fact that she had received an offer of marriage was what had set her young heart to fluttering like a caged bird. It was her first offer, and so unexpected, and from a rich man, too.

Surely that was enough to set a young girl's heart in a flutter, and it is not to be wondered at that Aggie was too excited to sleep any that night.

The next day Aggie began to weigh the offer in her mind. She was not yet seventeen years old. Had she been ten years older she would not have hesitated a moment.

But the idea of marrying a man so old as Mr. Seymour was not a pleasing one to her. But when she thought of the riches he had promised her as his wife, she wavered.

Thus for two weeks she wavered and longed to have some friend upon whose advice she could rely. At last she thought of good old Peggy Bethune.

She made up her mind that it was her duty to go to her under the circumstances and seek her advice.

The good-hearted old lady heard her simple story, and then asked:

"Do you love him, child?"

"No, I do not—yet I don't dislike him."

"Then don't marry him. Never give your hand without your heart. Better to live a lonely, loveless life, my child, than to marry a man you do not love."

"That is just how I feel myself," she said, "but thought I ought to tell you about it."

"You did right, my child. There are very few young girls who could resist such an offer as you have received. The right kind of a man will come along after a while. You are very young yet, and can afford to wait. Don't be hasty. A good girl and a pretty face need never go begging for a husband."

Aggie went back home with a light heart, for she was now convinced that her own heart was right all the time. She thought of the bright, manly face of Burke Halliday, and wondered if he would ever ask her to be his wife.

How quickly her heart would say yes to such a question from him, though he had not a dollar in the world.

A day or two later she met Mr. Seymour in the little yard between the house and the gate. He smiled and gave her his hand.

"Mr. Seymour," she said, "I am ready now to give you an answer, and—"

"My dear friend," he replied, interrupting her, "I can see from your face what answer you have for me. You have not yet persuaded that heart of yours to love me. I can see that. But let me help you. See here—this is a diamond ring, worth five hundred dollars. Just see how your little hand will set it off. When you look at it on your finger it will remind you that somebody loves you, and love begets love, you know."

But she drew her hand away, saying tremulously:

"You must not tempt me, Mr. Seymour. I have examined my heart thoroughly, and find that I don't love you, and—"

"But maybe you can learn to do so?"

"No. I don't think I can. One cannot say to her heart 'love this or that one,' and be obeyed. We could not be happy, and I had much rather be happy than rich."

"You seek the love of one younger than I am," said he, looking her straight in the face.

"I seek not the love of anyone. I have tried to love you because you are good and kind, but I cannot."

"Will you wear this ring for my sake?"

"No—I cannot. What would people think of a poor work girl wearing diamonds. Indeed, I cannot."

She turned and entered the house, leaving him pacing back and forth in the little flower garden.

"She must—she shall be mine," he said in a low tone of voice, as if afraid of being heard. "She shall not escape me. If that young Halliday is in my way he must be got out of it, that's all. I won't stand being refused by a little chit of a girl like that, and for a boy who has nothing to recommend him but a reckless indifference to fire!"

CHAPTER XI.

AGGIE WAYNE'S REVELATIONS.

Burke Haliday slowly recovered from his wound, and at the end of a month he was allowed to go out on the street again.

The first person he visited was Aggie Wayne.

He called on her at the millinery store, and was welcomed cordially by Miss Higgins and the pretty orphan. Aggie was joyous in her reception of him.

They left the store together, as Burke signified his intention of walking home with her.

Aggie told him all about Mr. Seymour's offer of marriage,

and his wanting to give her diamonds, but said she would not marry him, as she preferred to be happy than rich.

"Well, well," said Burke, when she concluded. "I'm blest if I can understand it."

"Neither can I. But you won't say anything about it to anyone?"

"No; but I'll keep an eye on him, though."

"Hush! There he is now—over there talking with someone."

Burke looked across the street and caught a glimpse of Seymour and a man whom he did not remember having seen in Redboro' before. The two men, on seeing themselves observed, parted and went off in different directions.

Burke gazed at the other man as if trying to make out where he had seen him before. He finally decided that the man was a stranger whom he had never met.

In a little while the couple reached Mrs. Hart's gate, and Burke left Aggie. He went away toward his own home, and Aggie returned to the house and locked herself in Mrs. Hart's room.

The man whom our hero had seen with Seymour passed the humble cottage of the Widow Halliday that evening, and seemed to be inspecting the premises as much as he dared to.

Burke was deeply puzzled to know what it all meant, and he made up his mind to consult Jack Alton about it the next day.

He retired at an early hour and soon fell asleep. But some time after midnight he awoke, and lay there thinking about Aggie Wayne and the offer of marriage she had received. An hour passed, during which time he tried in vain to sleep again.

Suddenly he thought he heard something at the window of his little room. He look and listened. The slight noise was repeated, and he crept softly out of bed to make an investigation. Going to the window and looking out, he saw the form of a man on the outside. His head and shoulders came up to the window-sill. Burke was astonished. He knew that no one would care to burglarize the house of a family as poor as the Hallidays. It must be that mischief to someone was the motive.

There was no weapon in the room save a hatchet which had been lying on the little shelf above the washstand for months. He reached up and grasped the hatchet, and then stood still to await developments.

The window was raised softly by the unknown person, and his head protruded into the little room.

Whack! Burke brought the hatchet down on the head of the man, who dropped to the ground as suddenly as if a thunderbolt had struck him.

"By George!" gasped our hero, "I hit him with the blade when I only intended to give him a tap with the hammer."

He quickly lit the lamp and held it out of the window.

There lay a man whom he recognized as the one he had seen talking with Mr. Seymour.

"What does it mean!" he gasped. "I must go and call up Mr. Thompson across the street, as I can't leave the man lying here till morning."

Leaving the lamp on the little washstand, Burke hastily dressed and slipped out of the house softly, so as not to alarm his mother and sister.

Across the street lived the Thompsons, who were the friends of the Hallidays. He hastened to arouse Mr. Thompson.

"What's the matter, Burke?" Thompson asked, on recognizing the voice of our hero.

"Please come over as quick as you can. I am afraid I have killed a man who was trying to break into the house."

Thompson was fully five minutes in dressing and getting ready to go with the young hero. As soon as he came out they hastened across the street to the cottage and went round to the end of the house to the window under which the man had

fallen. The light from the lamp in Burke's room was streaming through the window. Burke reached through the window and got the lamp.

But when he held it so as to enable them to look for the man they were dumfounded at finding that he had gone away!

CHAPTER XII.

BURKE INTERVIEWS SEYMOUR.

Burke and Thompson looked at each other like men dreaming. There on the ground was a pool of blood where the wounded man had fallen. There were bloodstains also on the side of the house where the man had placed his hands in scrambling to his feet, but the man had disappeared. In the morning the police were notified, but nothing was found of the wounded man.

Burke was overwhelmed with questions, but would not say that he had any suspicions as to who the man was. He made up his mind, though, to speak to Mr. Seymour about it.

Before going to see Seymour he called on Jack Alton and borrowed a revolver from him.

"If you get a chance at the fellow, Burke, let him have every bullet in the gun."

The second day after the midnight incident at the Halliday cottage Burke walked home with Aggie Wayne, and stood talking with her at the gate till he saw Mr. Seymour coming down the street.

"Well, good-by, Aggie," he said, shaking hands with her. "I'll see you in a day or two again."

Aggie ran into the house, very anxious to keep out of Seymour's way since she had rejected his suit.

Burke went up the street to meet him, and was greeted pleasantly by him when they met.

"Have you found any clew to your visitor of the other night?" Seymour asked.

"Just a little one," replied Burke. "I saw you talking to the man who I knocked on the head at about sunset on the very evening of the occurrence. Aggie Wayne saw you also, though she does not know that it was the same man who paid me a visit."

"Ah! I know to whom you allude now. I was walking along over there on the other side of the street when a stranger, whom I had never before seen, stopped to inquire about a hotel in the town, just as I stopped you on the street the next day after my arrival in town."

Burke looked up at him in a way that convinced Seymour that he did not believe his story, and said:

"There is also another matter which I want you to explain. When you came here you were looking for the Widow Wayne, who had been dead over a year."

"Yes."

"You are now boarding at the same house with the widow's daughter."

"Yes."

"You knew them before?"

"No. A man who knew the widow years ago gave me her name when he heard that I was coming here, and asked me to call on her."

"But you have not told Aggie that?"

"No, because she did not know the man. There was no use in my doing so."

Burke was worse puzzled than ever, though he did not believe a word of the story. He wanted to remind him of the proposal of marriage, but his promise to Aggie prevented him from doing so.

"That yarn may all be true, Mr. Seymour," he said, after a pause, "but I don't take any stock in it."

Seymour laughed good-naturedly, and said:

"Oh, well, I'm not offering any stock for investment. They

ought to elect you Grand Inquisitor of the town, to find out the business of every man who comes to this place."

"If they did I'd soon find out all about your friend in short order," retorted Burke.

"My friend?"

"Yes, your friend, who came to me to get his head chopped!"

Seymour reached for his revolver, and Burke drew his first, hissing:

"I've got the drop on you!"

When Seymour saw that the young fireman had the drop on him with a revolver, he promptly put up his own weapon, and remarked:

"There's no use in having a fight about a matter that does not concern me."

"Of course not," sneered Burke—"not as long as I have the drop on you, at any rate."

"Well, you go your way and I'll go mine," returned Seymour.

"My way is to follow up the man who tried to kill me," said Burke, "and I have traced him up to where I saw him talking to you."

"And I have told you all I know about him. You know very well that I once accosted you on the street in the same way. What do I know or care about you that I should have an interest in you dead or alive?"

Burke could not say as much as he wanted to, as a number of people were passing down on the other side of the street every minute or two. He was bound by his promise to Aggie Wayne not to mention anything she had told him in regard to Seymour, and hence did not do so.

Seymour saw that the young fireman could not refute his argument, and with a self-satisfied smile, turned and walked toward the gate of the Hart cottage.

Burke walked slowly down the street toward his home, thinking over what had occurred, wondering what the mystery was that overshadowed him.

"There's something wrong, as sure as my name is Burke Halliday," he muttered to himself, "and I want to get at the bottom of it. I don't know but two men who have anything against me—Dingly and Pendergast—and I don't believe either of them would want me killed. Why should that fellow, a perfect stranger in Redboro', want to do me any harm? Hanged if I ain't puzzled to know what to think about it. I'll tell Jack all about it, and see what he thinks of it."

When Burke reached his home he sat down on his little piazza and began to think over his conversation with Seymour.

Mamie came to the door and said that supper was ready, and he went in to join her and his mother. Mrs. Halliday asked him if he had found out anything about the unknown visitor.

"Not a thing, mother," he replied.

"It is very strange, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed. It puzzles me to understand how a man, covered with blood as he was, could get away without somebody seeing him."

"It was midnight, you know," suggested his mother.

"Very true, but daylight came, too, and he had to wash up and change his clothes, if he had any to change with, and have his wound dressed. It seems to me that somebody must have found out something about it."

"Yes, it would seem so."

"Well, we may get at the bottom of it yet," remarked Burke. "I am on the lookout. I'd know the fellow if I saw him again."

That night Burke slipped out of the house and went over to see Aggie Wayne. He wanted to ask her to let him tell Jack Alton about Seymour's offer of marriage to her.

He found Seymour talking to Mrs. Hart when he went in.

"Is Aggie at home, Mrs. Hart?" he asked, on entering the room.

"Yes, I believe she is," said the landlady. "Shall I call her?"

"Yes, I would like to see her."

"Well, take a seat, and I'll call her."

Burke seated himself and Mrs. Hart left the room.

Seymour looked at him with a very serious expression of countenance.

"Halliday," he said, "I've a proposition to make to you, which, if you will accept it, will pay you a thousand dollars a year and your traveling expenses."

Burke was astonished, but was not to be caught.

"I don't want to have anything to do with you," he said. "You don't like me, and I am not in love with you, so it's better for us to keep away from each other."

Just then Mrs. Hart returned to the room and said:

"Aggie will see you in the dining-room, Burke."

"Thanks," and he arose and left the room without speaking again to Seymour.

Aggie was both glad and surprised to see him. She was all smiles, and asked:

"What in the world brought you out to-night, Burke?"

"Why, you did," he replied.

"Well, I am honored indeed."

"Of course you are, and so am I. The truth is, I want to tell Jack Alton what you told me about that old chap in the parlor, and you must let me do it."

"Why do you wish to tell him?"

"Because he may be able to unravel the mystery of his conduct toward you."

"I don't think there is any use of that," she said. "I have declined his offer, and that is the end of it."

"But you told me that he would not take no for an answer."

"Well, I guess he'll make up his mind to do so after awhile," and a very determined look came into her eyes as she spoke.

"You won't let me tell him, then?"

"No—not now, Burke."

"Well; that's all," and he started to leave.

"You are not angry with me?" she asked.

"No—of course not."

"Then sit down and talk to me. Tell me how you feel after your last adventure."

"I am feeling well enough, and expect to go to work to-morrow or next day."

"You may do wrong to go to work so soon."

"I don't think so. I can't afford to lose any more time."

"I'd wait another week, anyhow."

"I cannot afford it."

After nearly an hour's talk with her, Burke took leave of her and returned to his humble home, and left the young orphan to retire to her room.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE REVELATION OF THE FLAMES.

The next morning after the interview with Seymour Burke went to work in the store again.

He was quite recovered from the effects of the blow he had received on the head. Everyone who came into the store had a kind word for him.

That night the alarm of fire startled him from his sleep.

He sprang out of bed and dressed quicker than ever before in his life, and dashed away down the street at the top of his speed.

Pete—black Pete—the faithful fireman's coon, gave a yell

of welcome as he saw the young hero dash into the engine-room. The next moment they were dashing along the street at the top of their speed in the direction of the fire.

It was in a small shop alongside of a vacant building, and was caused by carelessness of some of the employees, who left a hot stove going at full blast.

There being no one in the factory, all the energies of the firemen were directed toward the saving of the building and the stock inside.

The smoke was very dense, which rendered it extremely difficult for them to do much in the way of saving the contents of the building. Yet they worked like beavers.

Suddenly the vacant old frame building alongside the factory took fire, and one of the streams was turned upon it. The house was like an old tinder box, and in a minute or so it was doomed.

Hark! A piercing yell was heard, coming from the upper story of the old frame house.

The next instant Burke Halliday had disappeared through the open door of the doomed building.

The ladder had not been placed against the vacant building because it was not needed. But the moment the young hero had disappeared in the smoke and flame inside Alton called:

"Up with the ladder! Be ready for him!"

One—two—three minutes of suspense passed. Then suddenly a cry of:

"There he is!" burst from the crowd that had gathered at the scene. Burke was at the window struggling with a man heavier than himself. Jack Alton sprang up the ladder like a squirrel, calling out:

"I'm coming, lad! Here you are! Give me the fellow and tumble out!"

Alton took the man from him, and Burke slid down the ladder almost suffocated. When he reached the ground he staggered and fell, gasping for breath.

A half dozen firemen rushed forward to drag him away from the fire and smoke and give him a chance to get some fresh air. He soon recovered and got up on his feet and looked around for Alton. The foreman was across the street in front of the fire, whither he had carried the man Burke had found in the burning building.

There was a crowd around the man, trying to make out who he was.

No one seemed to know him, until one man thought he was a man who had been stopping down at Hagan's boarding-house for several days. Burke came up and looked at him. The man was unconscious, but kept mumbling something that could not be understood. Suddenly Burke caught a little better glimpse of his face, and he cried out in surprise:

"Great Cæsar! The man I chopped with a hatchet!"

Exclamations of astonishment burst from every man present, and they all crowded forward to get a look at the man's face.

"What's his name?"

"I don't know, but he's the man. Look! There's the hatchet cut," and he lifted an old greasy cap that had been drawn down over his head, and exposed a frightful wound on the left side of the head.

"Send for a surgeon," said Alton. "He seems to be in a bad way."

Black Pete set off for the surgeon of the firemen, while another ran down to Hagan's boarding-house to get Hagan to come up and see if he knew the man.

Hagan and the surgeon arrived about the same time.

"He came to my house a week ago," said he, looking at the unconscious man, "and said he was from Buffalo, and gave his name to me as Morris. That's all I know about him."

"Can he be moved to your house?" the doctor asked.

"No, I don't want him," replied Hagan.

"Take him to the drug store, then," ordered the surgeon.

"Can he pull through?" one of the old citizens asked.

"I can't say just yet," replied the doctor. "I want to make an examination right away."

Quite a crowd followed him to the drug store, where he was laid on a sofa or lounge, so the doctor could make an examination of his injuries.

After a faithful search the doctor was able to find but two spots that indicated burns, and they, while very painful, no doubt, were not dangerous.

"He seems to be suffering from loss of blood and shock," said the doctor. "It came from the wound on the head."

Then he examined the wound and found that it had been very badly dressed, as if the man had performed that operation for himself.

The news flew all over the town (for more than half the population had jumped out of bed to run to the fire) that the man Burke Halliday had cut with the hatchet had been captured.

People wondered what would happen next when they heard the story that Burke had rescued him from certain death at the risk of his life.

The doctor worked with the man the rest of the night trying to restore him to consciousness. He seemed too weak, however, and it looked as though the wretch would pass in his chips without being able to utter an intelligible word to anyone. Burke remained at the drug store all the rest of the night, hoping the man would recover consciousness and be able to give an account of himself. But he was doomed to disappointment. The man seemed to grow weaker every hour, and the doctor said he did not believe that he would recover.

"Well, I know what to do, then," and Burke went out of the drug store and hastened up the street.

The sun was just rising over the tops of the hills around Redboro' when Burke entered the yard of the Hart cottage.

Aggie had just come down to breakfast when Burke entered.

"Why, Burke!" she cried, "what's the matter? You have been up all night!"

"Yes. I didn't go back home after the fire. I've been sitting up all night with a man who was hurt."

"I heard that somebody was hurt. Is he very badly hurt?"

"Yes—very badly."

"Come and have a cup of coffee and some hot rolls, Burke," said Mrs. Hart, with whom he was a great favorite. "You must be tired and hungry."

"Thanks, but I haven't time. I came up after Mr. Seymour. The man who was hurt wants to see him."

"Well, wash your face and hands and have some breakfast. Mr. Seymour will be down in ten minutes."

Between Mrs. Hart and Aggie he was forced to bathe his face and hands and sit down to breakfast. He didn't know how hungry he was till he began eating. Then he found that he was half famished, and ate ravenously.

Just as he was through eating Mr. Seymour came down to breakfast. He was very much surprised at seeing him there.

"Mr. Seymour, a man was taken out of a burning building last night, who was very badly hurt. He is at Dr. Smith's drug store, dying, and wants to see you right away."

"Wants to see me!" said he in great surprise.

"Yes. He is the man I was talking to you about the other evening."

Seymour turned ashen-hued and staggered back against the wall for support. He glared wildly around the room for a moment, and then fastened his gaze on Burke.

"What—did—he—say?" he asked, in a hoarse, hollow tone.

"I don't know," replied Burke. "He wants to see you right away."

He dropped into a chair and gasped:

"Is—he—dying?"

"Yes, the doctor thinks he is. Won't you go to him?"

Seymour was silent for a whole minute, Mrs. Hart and Aggie gazing at him in amazement.

"Yes," he said, "I'll go. You shocked me at first."

"I thought it would shock you," said Burke. "It shocked me when I found out who he was," and Burke led the way out of the house, followed by Mr. Seymour.

CHAPTER XIV.

BURKE'S DODGE TO ENTRAP SEYMOUR.

Out on the street, Burke walked as fast as he could with Seymour by his side.

"What does he say?" Seymour asked, his face still ashen-hued and a wild look in his eyes.

"Nothing at all. He is unconscious—has been all the time. I called to satisfy myself that you did know him. I am satisfied. I have two witnesses to the fact that you nearly fainted when I told you the man wanted to see you."

Seymour was in a rage. His color came back, and he ground his teeth, as he hissed:

"I had forgotten your insolence of the other day, but this I will neither forgive nor forget. I shall have my revenge, Burke Halliday," and he turned to go back to the house which he had just left without his breakfast.

"You had better come," urged the young fireman. "He may come to before he goes, and ask to see you."

Seymour re-entered the house and passed up to his room, much to the surprise of Mrs. Hart, who did not expect to see him back so soon.

A half hour later he came down to breakfast, looking as calm as a summer day.

"You didn't go down to the drug store, Mr. Seymour?" Mrs. Hart remarked.

"No, ma'am. That young Halliday played me a cruel joke, for which I can never forgive him, Mrs. Hart."

"What! Was that all a joke? Isn't there a man very badly hurt at the drug store?"

"Yes, ma'am, the man is there, I suppose, and very badly hurt, but he led me to believe that he was a friend of mine, and that he had asked to see me before he died. By questioning him I found out that the man was a stranger to me, and had not asked for me at all. Oh, I can't forgive Burke for that!"

"Well, well, I'd never thought Burke would do such a cruel thing as that! I really cannot understand it!"

"Neither can I. If there was a law to punish men for such actions, I'd give him the full benefit of it!"

Aggie had gone to the store where she was employed, and did not know what had occurred after Burke and Seymour left the cottage.

Burke went back to the drug store, and found that the man was still unconscious, and sinking gradually. The doctor said he would probably die without recovering consciousness.

Burke went home to let his mother and sister know that he was all right, and tell them the news.

They were both very much astonished, and thought it unfortunate indeed that the man could not clear up the mystery ere he died.

Mrs. Hart told a neighbor the joke Burke had played on Mr. Seymour, and in a couple of hours a dozen women were repeating it to their acquaintances, each one embellishing it to suit her own ideas of how it ought to be told.

The wounded man lay on the lounge at the drug store till very late in the day, growing weaker every hour, and just before sunset he breathed his last without having spoken a word to anyone. The coroner summoned a jury and held an inquest. Burke told his story, and the jury decided that it was, in their judgment, a case of justifiable homicide.

Burke went home that night sadder than ever before in his life. He had found out that he, after saving several lives, had at last taken one. His conscience did not chide him. He simply regretted the occurrence, and was very gloomy all that evening. The next day he went back to the store and proceeded to work harder than ever before in order to keep from thinking about what had taken place.

After a hard day's work he left the store to return to his home. He had gone about half-way when he was accosted by a stranger, who asked him if he was Burke Halliday.

"Yes, that's my name," he replied.

"A friend sent you this. Take it home and look at it," and he hurried away after placing a package in Burke's hand.

Burke took the package from the stranger in a mechanical sort of way, thinking that perhaps some friend had prepared a little surprise for him. He was going to ask the man who had sent it, but he hurried away so fast that he had no chance to speak to him. He held it out and looked at the shape of it. It seemed to be an oblong box about ten inches long by four or five wide, and as many deep.

Suddenly he held it to his ear and a smile came over his face.

"Ah! It's a small clock," he said. "I can hear it ticking. Well, I'd like to have a small clock for my bedroom, and I think this is just what I need."

He put it under his arm and went on his way, thinking of the surprise he had in store for his mother and sister.

Suddenly he heard a noise up the street behind him, and on looking back, beheld a horse drawing a buggy with one man in it, come at full speed.

The man in the buggy was desperately tugging at the lines in a vain endeavor to control the spirited animal. The horse was wild and unmanageable. His eyes were glaring and nostrils distended. People on the street ran hither and thither to escape a possible danger.

Burke started to look out for himself, when he saw a young mother and two children attempt to run across the street in front of the careering steed. With an exclamation of horror he dropped his package and sprang forward to save the children. Just as he caught up one of them he heard an explosion behind him that shattered the glass in the houses on either side of the street, and was heard miles away. He was thrown to the ground by the concussion, as was the mother and the two little girls.

On pulling himself together he looked around and found the horses lying dead in the street, the driver unconscious and bleeding, and the buggy a mass of kindling wood.

People were hastening to the spot from every direction. Women and children ran out of the houses, uttering cries of alarm, and every man was asking what had happened.

"What in creation has happened?" Burke asked himself, looking around him in a dazed sort of way. The terror-stricken mother of the two children he had saved clung to him and her little ones, pleading:

"For God's sake take us away!"

He led her into one of the houses across the street and left her there. Hastening over the way again, he joined the crowd that had gathered around the man found in the wreck of the buggy, and he asked who he was.

"Gus Dingly," replied one of the bystanders.

"The deuce! Is he much hurt?"

"If he isn't it's a miracle. Why, the buggy is a mass of kindling wood, and the horse is deader'n a smoked herring!"

"What caused it, anyhow?"

"Hanged if I know!"

Just at that moment Burke thought of his package which the stranger had given him up the street, and ran out of the crowd to look for it where he had dropped it.

He looked around to locate the thing, and finally decided that he had dropped it near the place of the explosion.

But on looking for it not a vestige of it could he find.

"I say, Burke," said a man, tapping him on the shoulder, "what did you have in that package you dropped on the street when you ran to help that lady and her two children out of the way of that horse?"

"Hanged if I know," he replied. "A man up the street gave it to me, saying that a friend had sent me a present, and advised me to take it home and look at it. I thought there was a small clock in it, as I could hear it ticking as I held it up to my ear. I dropped it when I ran to help that lady, and would like to find it."

"Well, I guess you'll never find it again."

"Why? Who took it?"

"Nobody. I was sitting on my piazza over there, and saw you when you dropped it. I was looking at it when the horse struck it with his forefoot. It exploded, killed the horse, splintered the buggy, and played the mischief generally."

"Good Lord!" gasped Burke.

"Didn't you know it was loaded?"

"No. If I hadn't dropped it, it would have killed me. I would have been blown to atoms, and no one would have ever known what did it."

Burke was sick at the idea of the peril he had been placed in, and leaned against one of the shade trees that lined the street on either side.

By this time a score or more of people had crowded around our hero and the man who had been an eye-witness of the explosion, and the story had to be repeated several times.

Gus Dingly was taken up and carried to his home, bleeding from several wounds and still unconscious.

Joe Pendergast, when he heard the story of the explosion of the package Burke had dropped in the street, hinted that Burke was getting even with Gus, though he might have spared the horse.

"Do you think he did it to blow up Gus?" a bystander asked.

"It looks that way to me. Burke is a bad egg when he gets a grudge against a man."

His words were repeated. People in repeating the story said that Burke threw an explosive in front of the horse, killed the animal, wrecked the buggy, and came near winding up Gus.

But few talked of his saving the lives of the mother and two children. Truth is rapid, and in less than an hour Burke was an object of suspicion with many of the good citizens of Redboro'. Jack Alton came up to his house to see him.

"Burke, my lad," he said, "they are saying that you tried to kill Gus Dingly with nitro-glycerine."

"My God!" gasped Burke. "Do they say that of me?"

"Yes, and some of your friends are going back on the young hero of the Wide Awakes. Tell me the straight of it, and I'll make some of 'em sick."

Burke told the story briefly.

"Well," said Alton, "that puts a different face on it altogether. It was a diabolical plot to blow you up, as that clock would have set the thing off before you got home, and that would have been the last of you."

"Yes, I am sure of it," replied Burke, "and yet, because Dingly and I are not friends, some say I tried to murder him."

"The truth will come out all right in the end, lad," said Alton, "and the Wide Awakes all believe in you. You have done nothing wrong, however much things may appear against you just now."

That night Gus Dingly recovered consciousness, and said that he saw Burke Halliday throw an explosive under his horse which blew up the whole turnout. Those who heard it were amazed. Everybody knew that Burke and Gus were enemies. That fact alone made everything look suspicious.

A justice of the peace was sent for. He came, and on the charge made by Gus issued a warrant for the arrest of Burke.

The constable was a relative of the Dinglys, and he hastened to make the arrest in as insolent a manner as possible. When he reached the cottage, Jack Alton and several other firemen were there. He entered without knocking at the door, and seizing Burke by the collar, said:

"I want you, you young murderer!"

Jack sprang to his feet, and clutching him by the throat, hissed:

"Hands off the lad, or I'll murder you!"

"I've got a warrant for him," said the constable.

"You have? Why didn't you show it as you came in, instead of acting like a brute?"

The constable then showed his warrant.

"Why didn't you wait till morning to arrest him?" Alton asked.

"That's none of your business."

"It isn't, eh? We'll see! Get out of here! You'll find Burke at the engine-house to-morrow morning. You shall not have the pleasure of locking him up to-night. Come on, Burke, we'll stay with you at the engine-house till morning."

The constable left in a hurry to report to the justice, while Burke went with his friends to the engine-house of the Wide Awake Fire Company.

CHAPTER XV.

MR. SEYMOUR GIVES UP AND LEAVES THE FIELD.

The justice was so indignant at having his warrant defied that he called on the sheriff to make the arrest. That officer went to the engine-house to look for Burke, accompanied by the constable and the justice himself.

They found about a dozen firemen there with their red shirts on, keeping company with the young hero.

It took just about three minutes to convince the sheriff that it would be better policy to defer making the arrest till the next morning. He had had enough of the firemen, and didn't want any more. The Wide Awakes made a night of it. A restaurant nearby supplied them with hot coffee and sandwiches.

When morning came they marched out to breakfast, ate heartily, and then waited for the justice's court to open.

Two hours later a dozen substantial citizens hastened to the justice's courtroom to offer bail for the young fireman. The preliminary hearing resulted in bail to a moderate amount being fixed. It was promptly furnished by Mr. Houghton, the father of Bessie Houghton, and Burke was allowed to go.

As may well be supposed, the town of Redboro' was in a fever of excitement during all this time, and all sorts of rumors floated about. One never knew what to believe. It now seemed that Burke would have to stand trial for an alleged attempt on the life of Gus Dingly. The firemen clubbed together and hired the best lawyers that could be found to defend him. Witnesses kept coming forward to tell him what they knew about the explosion, and in less than two days three reputable citizens said they saw the whole business—that his gallant rescue of the lady and her two children was the sole cause of his dropping the package which turned out to be an infernal machine, designed for his own destruction. Then two ladies said they saw him receive the package from the stranger.

His lawyer told him that he was in no danger whatever from the suit, and that he would be acquitted by the jury without leaving their seats.

Gus Dingly was badly hurt by the explosion, and laid in bed

nearly two weeks. He was very bitter against the young fireman, saying that it was a daring attempt on his part to kill him.

But who was the man that gave him the machine? Burke had a description of him printed, and the description given by the two ladies who saw the man give him the machine tallied exactly with his. The description of the man was sent everywhere and to New York City, supposing that he might have escaped to the city. But days passed and still nothing was heard of the stranger, and Burke resumed his work in the store.

One evening, at the boarding-house, Seymour joined Aggie in the parlor, and said:

"I am going away soon, Aggie."

"Why, where are you going, Mr. Seymour?"

"Back to New York. My business is nearly through here. But do you know that I am not yet able to make up my mind to give you up, Aggie?"

"I am sorry for that, Mr. Seymour," she said, "for you must make up your mind to do so in the end. I can never be your wife."

"Is that your final answer, Aggie?" he said.

"Yes, sir. I have made up my mind, and nothing on earth can change it."

"Well, my happiness is ruined forever. I know that I have no right to alter your decision—perhaps no right to expect you to love me. But, as you said weeks ago, one cannot control his or her affections. I love you better than my own soul—better than all my riches, and I shall go away leaving my heart with you. We may never meet again, Aggie. Will you let me leave with you a memento of my love?" and he drew the superb diamond ring he had once before offered her, and slipped it on her finger.

Aggie gazed at the magnificent jewel and turned pale.

"No—no! A poor girl can't wear such a jewel as that!"

And she quickly drew it off and held it out for him to take again.

"Keep it, even though you do not wear it," he said. "I only ask that you do not let it pass out of your possession as long as you live. Whenever you look upon it you will be sure to remember me. I shall not be entirely forgotten. Good-by now; I shall not see you in the morning," and he held out his hand to her.

She gave him her hand and said:

"Good-by, Mr. Seymour. I hope you may forget me in the love of one who can return your affection."

"I shall never love again," he said, and, giving her a nervous shake of the hand, he turned away and went to his room.

The next day she left the house after an early breakfast, and was at the store before he was out of bed.

During the day Seymour paid his bill, made Mrs. Hart a handsome present, and left, going to the railroad station in a carriage which he had ordered the day before.

The next day after he left a well-dressed woman came into the millinery store to make some purchases, and, in the course of conversation said:

"I am stopping at the Redboro' House, but would rather live at a private boarding-house, and, as I am obliged to remain here a fortnight, would pay well for room and board in a quiet house."

"My landlady has a vacant room," said Aggie, "which might suit you."

"Where is it?"

"Down Main street. Anyone can tell you which is Mrs. Hart's house."

"I am ever so much obliged to you," said the woman. "I shall ride down there and see for myself."

She left the store and went out to a carriage which stood in

front of the place. When Aggie went home that evening Mrs. Hart was in a smiling good humor. She had secured a new boarder who had paid her as much for a week as two persons usually paid in a month.

Mrs. Emma Conant—the new boarder—proved to be very pleasant company indeed. She played and sang, and made the house lively. Then she bought no end of sweetmeats of every description, and in a couple of days had completely won the heart of Aggie Wayne.

One day, about a week after the arrival of the new boarder, a carriage drove up to the door of Mrs. Hart's cottage.

Mrs. Hart wondered greatly, but in a few minutes she heard her new boarder coming downstairs.

"I am going to take a ride through your lovely little city," said she, "and would like ever so much to have you go along."

Mrs. Hart lost no time in getting ready for the ride. It was a bright oasis in the double-trouble sea of her life, and she felt truly grateful to her generous-hearted boarder for the treat. Just as Aggie was leaving the store the carriage stopped there, and Mrs. Hart's cheery voice called out to her:

"Aggie! Child! Come ride with us."

The young girl stopped and gazed at her in astonishment.

"Why, Mrs. Hart!" she exclaimed.

"Come. Get in and ride home with us," said the new boarder, making room for her as the coachman held open the door.

Aggie could not recollect that she had ever ridden in a carriage in all her life. It had long been a dream of hers to ride in a fine carriage and look to the right and left at the houses, trees, gardens, green fields, and feel as happy as the birds. She uttered a cry of joy and sprang into the carriage.

"Oh, this is glorious!" she cried, leaning back in the soft-cushioned seat. "I did not dream of such a delicious ride as this."

"I am glad you enjoy it," remarked the lady. "If you wish it we will ride down the river road a couple of miles."

"Oh, I would like it ever so much!" she replied.

But Mrs. Hart shook her head.

"You will have to go without me," she said. "I must get out and see about supper, for I know you will be hungry enough after your ride."

"Well, we'll be back just in time to enjoy the supper," replied the lady, as the carriage stopped in front of the house to let Mrs. Hart get out.

The long drive down the river road was one that one, not a confirmed dyspeptic, could not have failed to enjoy. Aggie was delighted beyond measure, and thanked her generous friend a dozen times during the ride.

On the way back Aggie saw Burke Halliday returning to his home from the store.

"Oh, there's Burke," she exclaimed.

"Who's Burke?" her companion asked.

"Why, Burke Halliday, the brave young fireman you have heard us all talking about so much. There he is."

She waved her hand to the young hero. Burke lifted his hat and bowed. The lady looked back at Burke, and saw him standing where he stopped on recognizing Aggie in the carriage.

"I am sorry we did not ask him to ride with us," she said, "as I should like to see him and make his acquaintance."

"Oh, he is one of the best fellows in the world," said Aggie, quite enthusiastic in praise of the young hero.

"You like him very much, do you?" the lady asked.

Aggie blushed and looked away.

"That tell-tale blush," exclaimed the lady, "answers the question. Well, I am not surprised at it. He saved your life at the risk of his own, and the romance would not be complete unless love came in and—"

"Burke has never uttered a word of love to any girl yet,"

said Aggie, suddenly turning and facing her companion. "He is nothing but a boy yet."

"Yes—yes, I know that, and yet he seems to be every inch a man. He is indeed a hero, and no young girl can be blamed for falling in love with him. Were I to know him at your age I would certainly fall in love with him, too."

"Of course you would," laughed Aggie. "All the girls in Redboro' like Burke. He is kind to everybody, and is so brave."

By this time the carriage returned to the Hart cottage, where Aggie and the lady left it and entered the house.

The coachman drove away, and Aggie asked of her companion:

"Is that your carriage?"

"Yes, dear."

"How rich you must be!"

"I am rich enough to be able to live without care," was the reply. "And yet I was once as poor as you are, my child."

Aggie opened wide her eyes.

"How did you get rich?" the young girl asked, as they entered the lady's room.

"I was a shop girl in New York," answered the other, "and one of the owners of the shop took a fancy to me. He was old enough to be my grandfather, but was very rich and kind and good, and so I married him. I now own the shop, and several big stores besides."

Aggie looked at her in astonishment.

"Did you love him?" she asked.

"No—of course not. I married him for his money, and I got it. I am happy now as the happiest. I tell you, child, that riches go a long way in this world toward making life worth living."

Aggie had something to think about that night, and it may well be supposed that she did more thinking than sleeping. Here was a woman happy in the possession of everything that heart could wish, who had taken an offer similar to the one she had rejected. Which of the two was the wiser?

When she came down to breakfast the next morning she was smiling and happy, and her greeting to Mrs. Hart and the new boarder was that of a bright, sunny-hearted young girl.

When she was leaving the breakfast table the new boarder said to her:

"We shall have another ride to-morrow if you can go."

"Oh, I can go well enough," she replied; "Miss Higgins is very kind to me."

Aggie left the house and hurried on her way to the store.

She had gone about two blocks when she heard a voice behind her say:

"My lady rides in her carriage now, and won't notice us poor fellows any more."

"Oh, Burke!" she cried, wheeling around and grasping the young fireman's hand. "I had such a glorious ride yesterday! How I did wish you were with us!"

"You did seem to enjoy it," he replied. "Whose carriage was it?"

"The lady who boards at Mrs. Hart's. She was once a poor shop girl like me, but married a rich old man, and now she owns everything, having all that heart could wish. Isn't she lucky?"

"I should say so. When a person has plenty of money he ought to be happy all the time."

"Yes, I think so, too. I am going to ride with her again to-morrow afternoon."

"Good! Have all the fun you can."

They walked side by side to the door of the store, where they shook hands and parted, he promising to call and see her after her ride.

CHAPTER XVI.

BURKE GETS A CLEW TO A MYSTERY.

All day long Aggie Wayne was thinking about her promised ride. That evening when she returned home she told her generous friend that Miss Higgins had kindly given her permission to go at the time suggested.

The evening was spent in conversation, and at the usual hour they all retired. When the occupants of the upper part of the house awoke they were nearly strangled with smoke.

The kitchen had taken fire, and the lower portion was in flames ere anyone was aware of it.

Then came wild, piercing screams for help from the female portion of the household. The engines came up at full speed, and in another minute the firemen had the ladders up to the windows. Burke came in first, with Alton behind him.

"Burke—Burke! save me!" cried Aggie, running wildly around the room, blinded by the smoke.

"Here I am, Aggie!" cried Burke. "Where are you?"

She uttered a cry of joy, and rushed in the direction of his voice. He caught her in his arms and bore her to the window. To climb out and bear her down to safety was the work of but a couple of minutes more. She was in her night-dress, just as she sprang out of bed, and had fainted from excitement.

Burke hastily rushed over to the next house with her, and gave her in charge of one of the neighbors.

Jack Alton brought down Mrs. Hart, who was much heavier than Aggie, and not so easily handled. She, too, barely escaped with her night-dress.

Just as Jack reached the ground with Mrs. Hart, Burke heard a series of piercing shrieks in another room. He sprang up to the ladder with the nimbleness of a squirrel, and disappeared through the window.

The screams came from another room, and he threw himself against the door with all the force his weight could give. The door flew open, and he staggered into the room.

"Save me! Save me!" cried a lady, rushing into his arms.

Burke caught her, but found that she was much heavier than himself, and thought that if she swooned he would never be able to get her out.

She clung to him as if for life. A tongue of flame reached through the door and set her night-dress on fire. It blazed up an instant. Burke put the fire out, and snatched up a silk dress which hung on a chair. As good luck would have it, it went over her head, and she hastily threw up her hands to pass them through the sleeves, which she did, and thus mechanically got inside her dress.

His presence and assistance partially quieted her excitement.

"My shoes! my shoes!" she exclaimed, as he tried to lead her out of the room. He dropped on his knees and felt on the floor for her shoes. His hands touched them. One had a package of something in it, which he mechanically thrust into his pocket.

"Come, I have your shoes!" and he dragged her out of the room by main force. At the window he climbed out and drew her after him. She was too heavy for him to handle, and Jack Alton ran up to his assistance.

"Give her to me, lad!" said the foreman, taking the half-fainting woman in his arms.

Burke slid down the ladder, still holding to the woman's shoes. The great crowd of spectators yelled themselves hoarse cheering him. Alton landed with his burden a moment or two later, when Burke said to her:

"Here are your shoes. Put them on or you may hurt your feet."

He knelt down and placed the shoes on her feet, and then led her away over to the house where Mrs. Hart and Aggie

Wayne had been carried. Aggie had recovered consciousness by that time, and received her friend with tears of joy in the room that had been given up to the three unfortunate victims of the fire.

Burke went back to the scene of conflagration and worked nobly to save as much of the property as possible. But the flames had made such headway ere they were discovered that little of value was saved. The house, being an old frame cottage, the timbers of which being very dry, was a total loss. Not even the wearing apparel of the women was saved.

Aggie and Mrs. Hart were given some dresses to wear the next morning. Good old Aunt Peggy Bethune came to their assistance with everything they needed. Bessie Houghton's wardrobe furnished an outfit for Aggie, and the other lady was so fortunate as to have her purse and diamonds in the pocket of the dress Burke had thrown over her in the room where he found her. She was able to purchase such things as she needed, although quite a number of ladies tendered her the use of their wardrobes.

The fire over, the Wide Awakes returned to their quarters, where Jack and Burke were congratulated by their comrades on their gallant exploits that evening.

Neither of them had received any injuries, which was a miracle under the circumstances, and they congratulated each other heartily on that score.

It was a little after midnight when the fire broke out, and it was nearly daylight when the brave firemen went home to snatch an hour or two of sleep before going to business or work. On retiring to his room Burke threw off his clothes very quickly, and in doing so he heard something drop on the floor. Looking down to see what it was, he found a small package which he recollects having found in one of the shoes belonging to Mrs. Hart's lady boarder, when he took them out of the burning building.

It was a small notebook containing a few letters and memoranda. He was about to place the package on the little table to remain till morning, when he could restore them to their owner, when he saw his own name written in the letter that was exposed just below the edge of the notebook.

Burke was not different from any other boy in regard to human nature. A nice sense of honor would have suggested to him the propriety of closing the book and laying it away. But he had been reared in the rough school of poverty where he had to struggle for his bread almost from the day he began to eat it. His curiosity to know who could have been writing to this lady about him was too strong for him to resist the temptation to read the letter.

He drew out the letter, only to find that a portion of it was missing, so that he could not find either date or signature.

What he did find, however, knocked all the sleep he was so anxious to get out of him.

"You will have to use considerable tact," the letter read, "to avoid arousing the suspicions of a young fireman named Burke Halliday. He is yet but a boy, but he was so fortunate as to save her life at a fire there one day, which exploit made him the hero of the town. I think but for her liking for him she would have accepted my suit, and I think he became jealous of me. If you can succeed in getting her out of the town and in our power she could easily be persuaded to become my wife, in which event your fortune as well as mine would be made, and then, she being in—"

Here the torn part of the letter abruptly ended the communication.

"What in thunder does this mean?" Burke asked himself, as he turned the torn letter over and over and read it again. "It means Aggie Wayne," he muttered, "though it does not mention her name. She is the one who was rescued, and—why, hang it, I believe that old Seymour wrote that! He speaks of

a suit, and I know that he did propose to her. Now he has gone away, and this woman is here to steal her away so he can have a chance to force her to marry him. The old rascal! Well, I'll see about that. But what does he want to marry a poor young girl like Aggie Wayne for? Ah, he says that his fortune would be made then. How would her marriage to him make his fortune? That's what I'd just like to know. And I'm going to find it out! Oh, what a sly puss that woman is! She had Aggie and Mrs. Hart out riding in a carriage the other day, and neither one of them suspected what she was up to. What must I do with these letters? To give them back to her would lead her to think that I had read them. To keep them would leave her under the impression that they had been destroyed in the fire. It's wonderful how things turn up. A fire revealed the hiding-place of the man who tried to climb through my window to murder me in my sleep, and now another fire throws this letter in my hands. I'll read the others now, and see what else I can learn about the matter."

He read the others, but could gather no light from them. They were all in the same handwriting.

"She has been employed by Seymour to get her in his power," he muttered, as he laid the letters down, "but there's a mystery about it which puzzles me. Why should he be so anxious to marry a poor girl like Aggie Wayne? That's the greatest puzzle I ever tackled. Hanged if I don't tell Jack about this and show him this piece of a letter. He'll know what to do. Jack is a long-headed fellow and a good friend."

He placed the little notebook in his pocket again, and then lay down on the bed in the hope of being able to get some sleep. But his mind was in such a whirl that no sleep came to him.

CHAPTER XVII.

BURKE MEETS THE NEW BOARDER.

Burke ate his breakfast that morning in silence, and then went to the store where he was employed, and proceeded to work as usual. Mr. Winthrop, the proprietor of the store, saw him, and surmised that he had not slept much the night before.

"You slept very little last night, I see," said the merchant.

"Yes, sir—not more than an hour at the most."

"Just what I thought. You had better go home and sleep till noon. One can't do much business unless he gets plenty of sleep."

"Burke looked up at the kind-hearted merchant and asked:

"Do you think you can spare me?"

"Oh, yes. Don't worry about that. The main business of the day is done in the afternoon."

"Thank you, sir," said Burke, and a few minutes later he left the store and returned home, where he slept about three hours.

Then he woke up and went to see Jack Alton, with the intention of telling him about the discoveries he had made in regard to Aggie Wayne and the new danger that threatened her.

But Jack was too busy for him to talk then, and he went away, going up the street to the scene of the fire.

From the ruins he went over to the neighbor's house where the three ladies who had been saved from the flames were domiciled for the present.

The first to greet him was good old Peggy Bethune, who caught him in her arms and called him her boy—her pet.

"But for you the poor child would have been roasted," she said.

Bessie Houghton was there. She had come to bring some of her dresses to Aggie. She greeted Burke with such cordiality as to make him blush.

"Miss Bessie," he said, "you are doing as much as I did. You gave her clothes. A girl cannot live without clothes—hence you have saved her life, too."

Just then the door opened, and Aggie, dressed better than Burke had ever seen her before, entered the room.

"Oh, Burke!" she cried, and flew toward him, and was clasped in his arms.

"I owe you my life a second time, Burke," the young orphan said, sobbing on his shoulder.

"I am so glad to see you unhurt," he replied. "How handsome you look in that dress!"

"Ah! but for dear, sweet Bessie I would have nothing to put on. Everything I had in the world was lost last night."

"Well, don't worry about that, dear," he said, in a fatherly sort of way. "The Wide Awakes will be a father to you. They are already talking about adopting you as their daughter."

"Oh, what a beautiful idea!" exclaimed Bessie, clapping her hands.

"If the company does that," said Aunt Peggy, "I'll give her a wardrobe to match their generosity."

Aggie burst into tears. Their kindness overpowered her.

Bessie took her in her arms and gave her that sweet, sisterly affection she so much craved.

The door opened again, and Mrs. Hart and her new boarder entered the room.

The two women hugged and kissed the young hero till he was disgusted.

"I am a sound sleeper," said the lady, "and am hard to wake when once asleep. I was nearly strangled when I opened my eyes. I sprang out of bed and screamed at the top of my voice. The next thing I knew I heard Burke's voice telling me to keep cool. Then my night-dress flamed up and I thought my time had come. He put the fire out and threw another over my head. How I managed to get my arms in the sleeves I don't know. But I did—and he even secured my shoes for me—my purse and diamonds were in the pocket of the dress. Was ever a man so thoughtful?"

There was no doubt of the gratitude of the lady. She showed it in every way that she appreciated the situation.

Burke remained with them a half hour, and then went away, after learning that Aggie would accompany Bessie to her home and remain a week with her, till another boarding-house could be found.

Out on the street Burke exclaimed to himself:

"She will be safe with the Houghtons. I'll see her to a, and tell her to beware of that woman. She will not fail to believe me, I know. She is a good girl, and that old rascal of a Seymour shall not have her if she does not want him!"

After dinner he went back to the store, feeling all right, and waited on quite a number of people as salesman.

On the way back home that evening he learned that Aggie had gone to the Houghtons' for a week, and that Mrs. Hart and her new boarder would remain with their present landlady until another house could be procured.

Matters settled down into the old order of things again in a day or two, and our hero gave himself up to the task of trying to unravel the mystery of the letter he had found in the shoe of the woman he had rescued from the flames.

At last he made up his mind to take Jack Alton into his confidence and tell him all about it.

He began by telling Jack of his first meeting with Seymour and of the latter's inquiry about the widow Wayne and her daughter. Then he spoke of his suspicions when he found that the man had actually secured board in the same house with Aggie; of his offer of marriage and her refusal, and of his leaving and the coming of the strange woman.

"And do you know," he added, "that the man I struck on the head with the hatchet was seen talking with him on the very evening of the night of the difficulty?"

"Miss Bessie," he said, "you are doing as much as I did.

"Jerusalem!" exclaimed Jack. "Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"Because I couldn't prove anything, and I didn't know what his game was. I tackled him on the street about it, and he said the man had merely stopped on the street to inquire the way to a hotel. Well, I couldn't say anything against that, you know, till I found out the fellow had been stopping several days at Hagan's place. I never got a chance to tackle him about the matter again, though he afterward wanted to hire me to go to California to attend to some business for him."

Jack was thoughtful.

"He wanted to get you out of the way, lad," he said.

"Yes, that's what I thought. But I declined, saying I didn't care to have anything to do with him."

"That was right. Pity you let him get away. Hanged if I don't believe he was at the bottom of those attacks on you."

"Well, here's something else I've found out," and he produced the torn letter he had found in the woman's shoe. "I found this in a small memoranda-book in the lady's shoe on the night of the fire. It is torn, having neither date nor signature. You can read it for yourself," and he handed the letter to Alton, who read it carefully through.

"Burke," he said, "there's some mystery about all this. The girl is in danger. We must look out for her."

"I don't see how we can well do that. I am in the store all day, and you are in the shop."

"We must get somebody to keep a watch for us."

"Who can we get?"

"Black Pete would be the best one we could find, but we can't spare him from the engine-house."

"No, but I think I know just the boy to do that."

"Who?"

"Billy Townsend."

"Can Billy keep his mouth shut?"

"Oh, yes. I know Billy well."

"Well, we want him to be about the place every afternoon to let us know when she takes the girl out riding again."

"Ah, yes, that's so! She told me of an engagement to ride with the lady the day of the fire, and that Miss Higgins had given her permission to leave the store an hour earlier that afternoon."

"Well, see Billy and set him to watching the Houghtons' or the Higgins' house when Aggie is there. Give him fifty cents a day, and make him keep his mouth shut about the business."

Burke started to leave when Jack called to him:

"Here, take this and pay him out of it. I have more money than you have," and he gave him a five dollar note as he spoke.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION.

Burke took the money and thanked his friend for it, and went out in search of the boy he wanted to put on guard.

It didn't take him long to find him, and in a little while he was engaged in letting him into what he wanted him to do.

"Will you do it for half a dollar a day, Billy?" he asked.

"Yes, in course I will."

"Very well. Here's a dollar for two days in advance."

And he handed him a dollar.

Billy took the money and thought himself rich, and went to work at once to keep an eye on pretty Aggie Wayne.

Burke then went to the owner of the store and said:

"Mr. Winthrop, I am expecting at any moment to have to follow up a clew to a deep mystery that concerns me very much. I have a boy on the lookout all the time, and when he brings me word that a certain thing is being done I want your horse and carriage on short notice. Can you let me have it?"

"Yes, Burke, if it is not in use at the time."

"In that case I will go to the livery stable for a team."

"Do you want to pursue anyone?"

"I wish to follow another carriage."

"Well, you might be an hour in getting a carriage. Why not have a horse saddled and kept in readiness to go at a moment's warning?"

Burke hadn't thought of that.

When he spoke to Jack that big-hearted fellow went to the livery stable and engaged two good saddle-horses to be kept in readiness for instant use till further notice.

Burke was at his post the next morning, and worked along till late in the afternoon, when Billy came hurriedly into the store, and whispered:

"They're goin', Burke."

"How many?"

"Just the two and the driver."

Burke called another clerk to wait on his customer, excused himself, and putting on his hat, hastened out of the store.

At the stable he found the horses ready.

He sprang upon one and led the other out, and rode briskly down to the shop where the foreman worked.

"Come, Jack," he called.

Jack washed his face and hands and threw on his street clothes, and in another minute was in the saddle.

"Which way did they go?" he asked.

"Down the river road."

They rode about a mile, and caught a glimpse of the carriage ahead. The carriage kept steadily on its way, and our heroes rode leisurely along, as if they were not conscious of the vehicle in front of them. The sun went down, and still the carriage kept on its way.

The stars came out, and our heroes moved up closer to the carriage. An hour later it stopped in front of a country tavern for a few minutes, when a man came out with a valise in his hand and entered the carriage, after which it resumed the journey.

"Ah, that was Seymour, I'm quite certain," said Burke.

"Yes—I think so, too. We'll turn stage robber and see what it all means."

"Stage robber?"

"Yes; we'll ride up and level our revolvers at the driver's head and compel him to halt."

They waited till they reached a point about a mile beyond the tavern, when they put spurs to their horses and dashed up to the carriage at full speed.

"Halt!" cried Jack, very sternly, leveling his pistol at the coachman's head.

The coachman was almost paralyzed, and gasped out:

"Don't shoot! Whoa!"

"What's the matter?" a voice called from inside the carriage.

"Robbers!" cried the coachman.

At that a woman inside began to scream. But only one.

A man put his head out of the window and said:

"Gentlemen, we have a very sick daughter in the carriage. Here's my watch and purse. Take them, and let us pass!"

"Oh, we can't take your word for that," said Jack. "We must search you for all you are worth. But stay where you are for a moment."

Jack then ordered the driver to get down from the box. He did so, and submitted himself to be tied hard and fast. Then Burke secured the horses, and made everything safe against accidents.

"Now you may get out, sir," said Jack to the man in the carriage. He obeyed without a word, and was bound as the coachman had been.

Burke struck a match, and held it up so that the faces of both could be seen. Seymour recognized the bold young fireman at a glance, and turned as pale as death.

"Burke Halliday!" he gasped.

"Yes, I am Burke Halliday," said our hero. "I told you I would catch up with you some day, and here I am. You threw me off the scent very nicely, but a little accident gave me a clew to the whole racket."

The woman in the coach sprang out of the vehicle, and running up to Burke, exclaimed:

"Oh, Burke, you saved my life once, and I know you will do it again!"

"That depends, ma'am. If Aggie says so I'll go my best on it! But I want to see what she says first."

"She is asleep in the carriage."

"That is not natural," said Jack, going to the carriage and holding a lighted match inside.

"Aggie! Aggie!" he called.

She did not answer.

"Mr. Seymour," said Burke, "you have got to explain all this, or I'll blow out your brains where you stand!" and he cocked his revolver.

"You can't frighten me," said the man, with dogged determination.

"I like a brave man," said Jack, "and we'll see whether you are one or not. Get the lines off those horses, Burke!"

In two minutes Burke had the lines off, and the bold fireman was adjusting the end of it around the villain's neck.

The woman begged and pleaded for mercy.

"Keep quiet, ma'am," said Jack, "or we may serve you the same way. If he tells the truth about this business we will let him off; otherwise we'll hang him till he's dead as sure as there is life enough in that limb to hold him up."

A stone at one end of the line enabled our hero to cast them over the limb.

"Ready now! What have you to say, Mr. Seymour?" Jack asked.

"I've nothing to tell you. Hang me if you want to."

"With pleasure," and they began to pull him up.

As his feet left the ground the woman screamed and fell to the ground in a faint.

He squirmed in the agonies of suffocation for a minute or so, and then they let him down.

He fell to the ground, being unable to stand up.

They waited for him to recover his speech.

"How now?" Alton asked. "Are you willing to straighten out this mystery?"

"What do you want to know?"

"We want to know all about this business about the attempts to get Burke out of the way and the abduction of the girl."

"I'll tell you on one condition."

"What is it?"

"That you will not let the public know it."

"I'm willing to that."

"Well, my name is Seymour. I am a Philadelphia lawyer. You'll find my professional card in my pocket on the left side. I have a good practice. A few weeks ago I was authorized by a law firm in London to hunt up a certain Mrs. Wayne and her daughter Aggie. They were wanted as the sole heirs of two million dollars, which an uncle of Mrs. Wayne had left them when he died in India. I got track of them, and made up my mind to marry the mother or daughter, and thus get hold of the money. That's all there is in this case."

Burke gave a prolonged whistle.

"You will find the London lawyer's letter in my valise there, and I'll give it to you if you will untie my hands."

"But why did you want to have me knocked over?" Burke asked.

"Because you were in my way. The girl is in love with you, and would not listen to my suit."

Burke's heart was like a sledge-hammer on hearing that.

They secured all the papers bearing on the case, and then let the parties go. Aggie was carried back to the tavern and given in charge of the lady of the house.

The next morning she was panic-stricken at finding herself in a strange place and among strangers.

Burke and Jack went up and told her all that had happened, and showed her the London lawyer's letter.

"You are richer than mud," said Burke, grasping her hand in his and shaking it warmly, "and I am more glad than if it was myself."

"You shall have half of it, Burke," she said, "for had it not been for you I should never have lived to see it."

"Just keep it all and give me your sweet self, Aggie," said Burke. "I love you, and, and——"

"Oh, Burke!" and she threw herself into her arms.

He clasped her in his arms and kissed her.

"I have loved you ever since the week of the mill fire," she said.

They took her back home to Redboro', and at once secured a lawyer to look after the English estate.

The trial of Burke on Dingly's charge came on a month later. Great crowds came to court to hear the evidence. But the prosecution really had no case, and the jury acquitted Burke without leaving their seats.

Then came a jubilee by the volunteer firemen of Redboro'.

They held a parade, and carried Burke through the town on an engine almost hidden under a pyramid of flowers.

Six months later old Aunt Peggy Bethune died suddenly.

She was buried with great honor, and her will was another sensation for the good people of the town.

She left the sum of ten thousand dollars to Burke Halliday as a reward for having saved her life when death by fire threatened. The balance of her fortune was left to her niece, Bessie Houghton.

Bessie became doubly popular after receiving the bequest of her aunt, and every young man in the town looked longingly and lovingly at her.

But she smiled on all alike, with a preference for Burke Halliday—so they all said. Our hero, however, had given his heart to Aggie.

A few months later Aggie's lawyer informed her that her inheritance had been forwarded in drafts on New York, the estate in India having been closed up and settled.

When Burke and she were nineteen years old they were married in the little church their mothers had attended, and they went on a long bridal tour to Europe before settling down in Redboro'.

Bessie Houghton is an old maid now—loved and respected as her Aunt Peggy was, and still the warm friend of the Pride of the Volunteers.

THE END.

Read "THE BOY MUTINEERS; or, SLAVERY OR DEATH," by Capt. Thos. H. Wilson, which will be the next number (509) of "Pluck and Luck."

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Pluck and Luck.

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 26, 1908.

Terms to Subscribers.

Single Copies.....	.05 Cents
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THINGS OF INTEREST.

The original map made by George Washington in 1775 of the lands on the Great Kanawha River, West Virginia, granted to him by the British government in 1763 for his service in the Braddock expedition, is now in the possession of the Library of Congress, says The National Geographic Magazine. The map is about two by five feet, and is entirely in the handwriting of Washington. The margin is filled with notes, also in Washington's handwriting, describing the boundary marks set by Washington and different features of the tract.

There is a widow in the Province of Loraine, Germany, who has a cat, unless the feline has died within the last six months. While the widow prizes the cat it is so homely that every one else makes fun of it. A girl 12 years old wrote a verse of poetry about the cat, and pinned it on the widow's door. The widow at once went to law about it, claiming that the language hurt the feelings of her pet, but the judge held that nothing but a club or stone could affect a cat. The verse was as follows:

She's a cross-eyed cat,
And I'm telling you that,
She can't catch a rat,
And looks like a bat.

The Belgian geologist Van den Broeck has called attention to a singular uniformity manifest in the direction of twisting exhibited by the trunks of trees. During the past eighteen years he has observed this phenomenon in many parts of Europe, Africa and America. He finds that in 990 trees out of every 1,000 whose trunks show torsion, the direction of the twist is from right to left, or contrary to the motion of the hands of a watch. Without asserting that the same cause operates in the two cases, he points out that this accords with the direction of revolution of cyclonic storms in the northern hemisphere, and also with that of whirlpools, which the French savant, Jean Brunhes, says almost invariably turn from right to left. The question arises whether in the southern hemisphere the torsion of tree trunks has an opposite direction, like the cyclonic motions of the atmosphere in that half of the globe.

Afghanistan is the only independent kingdom of Central Asia and is the section that is most likely to require foreign goods at an early date. It is usually known only as a wild, savage country, but under the progressive rule of its present Amir and his father such encouragement has been given to industrial development that the country is destined to rank much higher in the future and is worthy of careful study. Afghanistan is the Switzerland of Asia. It is bounded on the southeast by India and Baluchistan, on the west by Persia, and on the north by Asiatic Russia, while a strip of land,

like an outheld sword, projects between India and Russia in the Pamirs and touches Chinese Turkestan to the northeastward. Physically it has been described as a star of valleys radiating around the great peaks of the Koh-i-Baba, and everywhere bounded by steep and rugged mountains. The three largest valleys are those of the Oxus, Helmand and Kabul Rivers, the latter being a main tributary of the Indus. Throughout its whole extent Afghanistan is a rough, mountainous country, but is broken up by elevated, flat bottom valleys. It is due to the recurrence of the elevated valleys that these Asiatic Highlanders are also a nation of horsemen, and their cavalry have at times played an important part in the rise and fall of other kingdoms. Horse racing is an important occupation, and horses are one of their most important exports. The Afghans number somewhere between 5,000,000 and 10,000,000, and are a peculiar people, claiming descent from the lost tribes of Israel, calling themselves "Bani Israel," and tracing their lineage back through Sulaiman and Daud (Solomon and David) to Musa (Moses,) and on to Izac, Yacoob, and Ibrahim.

OUR COMIC COLUMN.

The Alligator (to our wandering dentist on the Nile)—Oh, please don't go. I've a hollow tooth, and I want you to fill it.

"The payments ain't so hard." "What terms?" "A dollar down and a dollar whenever the collector ketches me."

Her—Then he isn't what might be termed an entertaining man? Him—No; I never knew him even to entertain an idea.

"I lost heavily at the races yesterday." "A fool and his money are soon parted," replied the sardonic person. "Ah, but I won to-day." "A fool for luck."

The Young Lady—Will you procure me a hansom, young man? The Urchin—Beg pardon, miss, but how do yer think I'd suit?

"Do you think we shall be allowed to follow the same avocation in a future life that we do in this?" "I hope so." "What do you do?" "Nothing."

"A visitor to see you, sir." "I'll bet he wants some favor," grumbled Senator Greathead. "It's a lady, sir." "Ah! that means half a dozen favors."

"Why didn't you put on the porous plaster I sent you?" "Plather! Docthor, I'm a mamber ov th' Hod Carriers' Union, and it's against th' rules for me to do anny plasterin' except in th' reg'lar workin' hours."

In the railway station at Wilkesbarre, which has a large Slavic population, is a sign over the bootblack stand, bearing the legend: Shine 5 cents. Polish 10 cents. An Irishman stood in front of it the other day, apparently plunged in profound thought. At length he pulled his pipe from his mouth and spat vigorously. "Faith, and they'd be doin' well to charge double for dagoes, too," was his emphatic comment.

Senator Rayner, of Maryland, is in favor of adequate salaries for school teachers, and at a reception he told a story about a teachers' meeting in a district where the salaries were extremely low. "A rich, portly banker opened the meeting with an address," he said. "The banker concluded his remarks with an enthusiastic gesture and the words: 'Long live our school teachers!' 'What on?' shouted a thin, pale, seedy woman in a black gown, slightly smeared with chalk marks."

ABOARD A SLAVER.

By HORACE APPLETON.

"I was a leetle lad no more'n so high then," said old Jim Gaff, who did not look as though he had ever been small enough to be a lad, for he was big enough to have been cut up into a dozen boys, with material still left for more.

It was a howling night in November when the remark was made, and I was stormbound in old Jim's shanty, or castle, as he called it, on Wing Island, about four miles off the coast.

Being fond of hunting water fowl, I had been caught out in the storm, and had barely managed to make Wing Island, let alone the mainland, where I lived.

He had made me very welcome at his fireside, had provided me with food and drink, and as we were chatting together he had remarked that the night was "just like a night forty-four years afore," concluding his reminiscence with the sentence which begins my story.

He held out his hand to signify what "so high" meant, and I concluded that he intended to describe a boy of sixteen or thereabouts.

"Is there any story connected with the time?" I asked. "If there is, and you need encouragement, I'm just in the mood for listening, Jim."

"Waal," drawled Jim, relighting his pipe and puffing slowly at it, "there's summat of a yarn, tho' mebby ye'll say 'tain't much to speak on. Howsomever, ef ye want ter make fast while I'm in grappin' distance, I'll cast the heavin' line."

"Do," I said, encouragingly.

"I war a stowaway," he continued, in a musing tone, "so ye see 'twar my fust v'yage. I dunno 'zactly how old I war—never 'did know, in fact, an' don't now; but leastwise I war a leetle shaver with more pluck than sense."

"I hed been blackin' boots, holdin' horses, runnin' errands, and sich like around the streets of Boston ever since I could remember, and takin' an awful lot o' lickin's from an old woman who sorter looked arter me in the meantime."

"I war a-gettin' mighty sick o' them lickin's, too. The thing had been bilin' inside fur a good while, an' one night—jist sich a night as this one—without waitin' ter heave anchor I jist cut ther hawser and floated away on the tide. That is, instead o' goin' arter my usual lickin', I went down around ther ships along o' ther wharves."

"The wind was a-howlin' an' ther rain was comin' down 's though it never expected 'nuther chance ter make port, but I didn't mind the wet no more'n a sea-gull."

"Most folks, tho', hed gone below decks, fur, 'cept through the grog-shop windys an' doors, there was hardly a soul to be seen. Now 'n' then a cop would step out of a sheltered doorway, but he'd dive inty ther next one quicker'n scat."

"Waal, I walked along, thinkin' what I would do, an' finally I jist made up my mind that I'd go to sea. Thet war my cussed pluck."

"Anyhow, I began to tack about a leetle, in search o' the sort of craft I thought I'd like, an' afore long I lit onto a clipper that suited me to a dot. I didn't know much about ships then, but I knew enough ter know that that air clipper war a beauty, an' so I jest made up my mind that I'd sail in her."

"Ther thing that settled the question fur me more'n anything else war, that while I war sittin' on a heap o' chains a-lookin' her over, two crafts sailed past me ter wind'ard, an' hove to, at ther ladder, an' one o' them said ter t'other:

"See that ther men are all aboard ter-night, for I wanter sail at four sharp."

"That settled it. I knowed then that I had found ther ship

I war lookin' fur, an' so I went about an' set sail fur the nearest grocery store, where I spent the few pennies I had fur bread an' cheese an' sich."

"Then I headed fur ther clipper. I don't think they were a-lookin' fur stowaways that night, fur I had no more difficulty boardin' ther clipper 'thout being hailed then ye'd hev boardin' this island at t'other end."

"Waal, I stowed myself away as snug's a dead-eye, an' went sound asleep. I s'pose I slept all night, fur when I woke ther ship war a-pitchin' an' divin' at a great rate, I thought, an' great Jerusalem! wasn't I sick? In about an hour I'd a-welcomed one of old Nan's lickin's, an' hugged her fer givin' it ter me, if I cud ha' got out o' that clipper. But I couldn't, no way, and so I staid down in that hole till ther bread an' cheese war all gone, and my tongue was parched with thirst."

"Then I clim' out an' showed myself on the deck, an' in jist about two minutes I caught a lickin' that made me think Old Nan's thrashin's were jist love-taps. Ther cap'n o' that clipper tied me ter th' rail an' then he tuck a rope's-end, and when he got through I war senseless."

"When I kim to I war in the focastle, an' I staid thar, too, fur two days, cos I warn't able ter walk; my back war as full o' ridges as an old water-logged hull."

"Waal, ter make a long story summat shorter, I found out precious soon that I hed shipped with an ole man wot war wusser'n the devil fur ugliness, but wat war wuss'n ther hull bizness war the sorter ship I'd sailed in, cos I diskivered that she war a slaver."

"Thet air term slaver don't signify ter much nowadays, but then it war a purty common traffic, and a feller hed ter be a cussed brute afore he sailed unner sich orders; an' by the time he hed carried two or three shiploads of niggers an' sold 'em, the little human natur that war in him when he started war all gone, an' the only difference 'tween him an' a hyena—which is ther cussedest animile I know—was that ther man war wuss."

"The crew numbered about twenty all told, an' they hed a young feller on board about twenty-one or two, who war on his way to preach among the heathen. He tole me arterwards that he had been recommended to the cap'n by a merchant he knew, an' he'd understood, till they were in deep water, that the clipper traded in ivory an' ebony, which is purty nigh the truth when all's said, only 'twar animated."

"Waal, he war horrified an' wanted to light out. He had ter listen ter ther cussin' an' swearin' of the crew fr're mornin' till mornin', 'sides seein' ther hull lot thumpin' me around 's though I war an air-bag stuck up on purpose to hit."

"One day when ther cap'n knocked me clean across the deck with a windlass handle, jist fur fun, he interfered, an' told ther ole man that he ought ter be ashamed of himself, and they had some words which ended in the ole man's knockin' him down harder'n he did me."

"Thar, ye infernal preacher," said the ole man, "I'll teach ye that I'm master aboard this craft, an' ef ye give me any more of yer slack I'll have ye chucked over ther side."

"The young feller got up, an' though he war a parson, I seed that he had plenty o' tackle on him fur ter weather a storm."

"'Cap'n,' said he, 'ef ye ever raise yer han' to me agin, you'll be sorry fur it. I know this 'ere's yer ship, an' that among yer crew an' toward that helpless boy ye kin be's big a brute's yer a-mind ter; but I'm a passenger; I hev paid my money, an' you've taken it, an' there's a law for regulatin' yer brutality toward me.'

"Haw, haw, haw!" laughed the cap'n, "ye've got bristles, hev ye? Well, don't ye dare ter show 'em here, fur if ye do I'll send ye ter the fishes."

"Ye wouldn't dare!" said the parson.

"I wouldn't, eh?" mocked the old man. "Well, ye hedn't bet-

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